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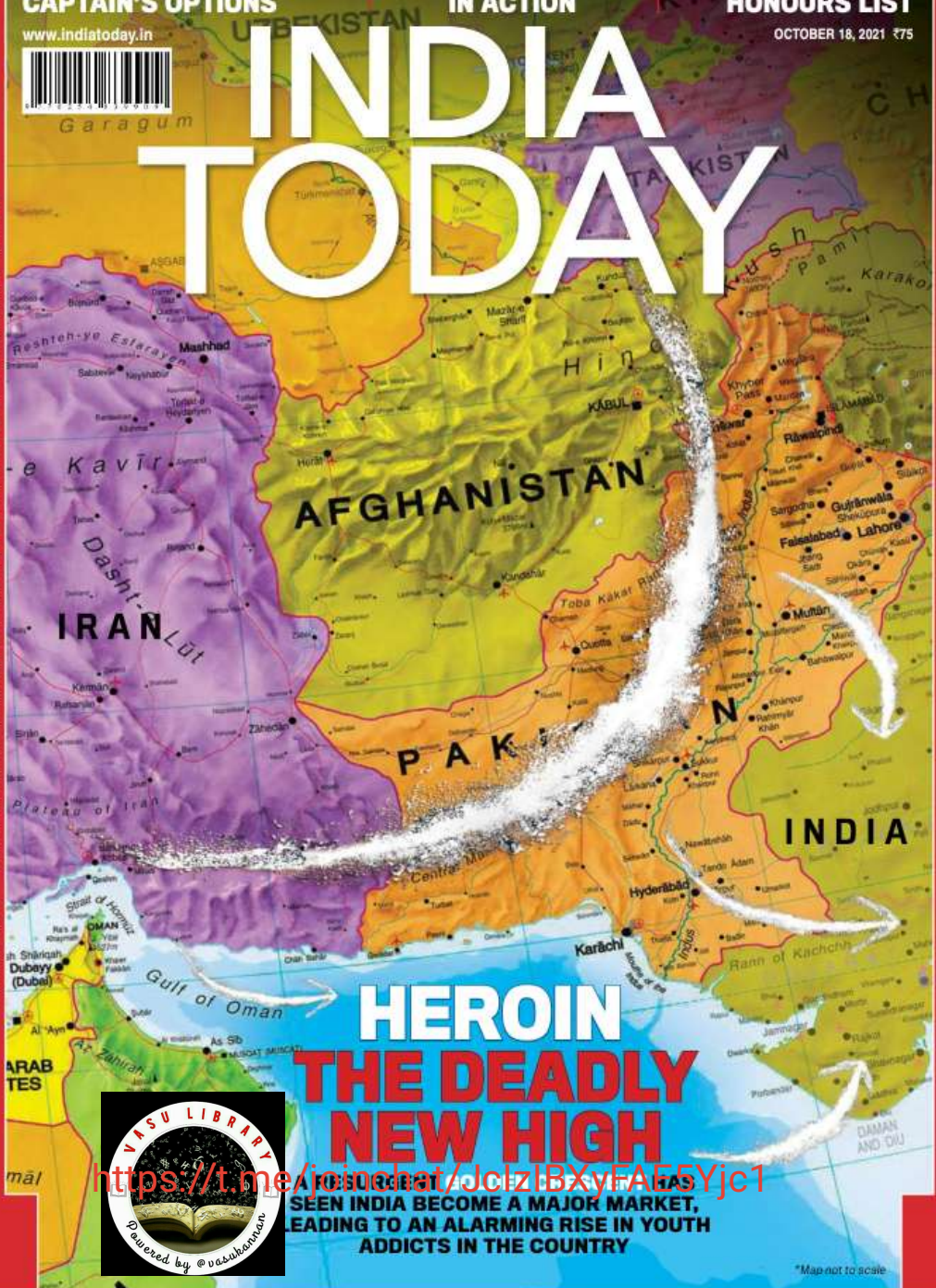

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THE DEADLY NEW HIGH

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*Map not to scale

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FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Two drug busts last week, 500 km apart on India's west coast, gave us a measure of India's narcotics problem. On September 15, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence unearthed one of India's largest drug hauls—3 tonnes of Afghan heroin estimated to be worth Rs 15,000 crore—from the Mundra port in Gujarat. A fortnight later, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) arrested a group of partygoers in Mumbai for consuming drugs. Among them was the son of a prominent movie star.

India has long had a drug problem; now, it seems to be growing. The country has become a significant consumption point from being a mere transhipment route for narcotics. An estimated 50 million Indians are believed to use drugs. That consumption might have only gone up during the pandemic due to the enhanced stress. The drug habit is fuelling crime, disrupting families and affecting the social fabric of the country. Moreover, drug dependence is a psycho-social-medical problem that can lead to accidents, violence and suicide.

That drug consumption is no longer a social stigma is worrisome. As S.N. Pradhan, the director-general of NCB, told us, "Consuming alcohol is no longer the in thing. If you are fashionable and 'with it', then you (should be seen) doing drugs."

September 28, 2020

Massive regional shifts, meanwhile, have altered the dynamics of the trade. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is a most ominous development. The group is known to have profited from the drug business—Afghanistan accounts for over 80 per cent of the world's illegal opium, which is refined into heroin and shipped globally. Given their precarious finances and limited sources of income, the Taliban could well turn their country into a narco-state. This cannot bode well for India, which has the world's largest population of youngsters and a rising heroin habit. Drugs smuggled out of Afghanistan via Pakistan into India have spiked in the past two years. Last year, the Border Security Force recovered 507 kg of drugs in Punjab alone, more than all the seizures in 2018 and 2019. Such seizures, as the Mundra consignment showed us, are only the tip of the iceberg.

There are only rough estimates of the size of India's illegal drug business. One government agency pegs it at around Rs 30,000 crore (extrapolating from the Rs 3,000 crore worth of drugs seized annually, and seizures making up roughly around 10 per cent of the trade). Anyway, the business is profitable enough for drug cartels to stay invested and take huge risks. Upping their game, the kingpins now run their empires from afar through a network of minions, the DarkNet to conduct transactions and couriers to reach the contraband to the addicts.

Close to 600 million people, or nearly half our population, are under 25, giving traffickers a captive market. The normalisation of drug use and growing willingness among youth to experiment with drugs adds to the cohort's vulnerability.

Cocaine imported from South America and smuggled into India via sea and air routes continues to be a drug of choice for the country's well-heeled. An estimated 1 million cocaine users in India can afford to pay upwards of Rs 5,000 a gram.

The poor are equally vulnerable. More than half of India's drug consumers are believed to be from the poorest of the poor, consuming a range of cheap drugs from smack to brown sugar. Even more troubling is the fact that children are the most susceptible to the easy availability of drugs. Juvenile cases registered under the NDPS Act rose 21 per cent on-year to 264 in 2020 from only 123 in 2015 and 82 in 2010.

A drug rehabilitation centre we visited in the heart of Delhi had children as young as 10 years old being treated. They must have had turned addicts at an even younger age.

It is thus crucial that the government mechanism designed to fight the drugs menace be overhauled entirely. All counter-drug campaigns rest on three pillars—supply reduction or disrupting the supply of drugs, demand reduction or trying to get people not to want to take drugs, and harm reduction or ensuring the rehabilitation and recovery of drug addicts. We have a federal agency like the NCB, but it needs to be made more effective along the lines of a globally present organisation like the US Drug Enforcement Agency. Technology and drug-related intelligence-gathering and analysis need to be prioritised. Counternarcotics campaigns must become a central part of our governance debate. In August 2020, the social justice and empowerment ministry launched a 'Drugs Free India' campaign targeting 272 districts in 32 states and Union territories with the highest drug consumption. The campaign claims to have reached out to 12 million people, including women and children. We need many more such initiatives.

We also need to re-examine certain provisions of the NDPS Act, which makes little distinction between the consumer, the street pedlar and the big drug dealer. As state capacities and resources are limited, the government needs to prioritise and go after the big fish rather than expend energy on chasing pedlars.

The government should also consider the legalisation of commonly consumed drugs like cannabis. It can earn states revenue as they do from tobacco and alcohol. This will allow enforcement agencies to focus on significant threats like heroin and cocaine.

Our cover story, 'Heroin, the Deadly New High', written by Managing Editor Sandeep Unnithan, looks at how the new narcotics threat has metastasised in recent months. Deputy Editor Kaushik Deka examines Assam's war on drugs and Senior Associate Editor Kiran D. Tare looks at Mumbai's worrying drug scene. There is very clearly a need to crack down on the drug menace before it gets out of hand.

(Aroon Purie)

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COVER STORY
HEROIN: THE DEADLY NEW HIGH
The surge in the illicit opium trade from the Golden Crescent region has seen India become both a major transhipment hub and a big consumer

Cover by NILANJAN DAS

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CORRIGENDUM

In the article 'A Wild Wind from Western UP', published in our September 27 issue, Rashtriya Lok Dal chief Jayant Chaudhary was mistakenly referred to as the son of Chaudhary Charan Singh instead of as his grandson. We regret the error.

Note to the reader

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Why Asia's longest tunnel through Zoji La could be a game changer for J&K's economy

by Shwweta Punj

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by Aditi Pai

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by Romita Datta

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WE FOR VICTORY West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee with TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee

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MAMATA BANERJEE

MAMATA NOW EYES DELHI

By Romita Datta

On September 26, at a street-corner meeting before the Bhabanipur bypoll, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee proclaimed: "Bhabanipur *theke arekta khela shuru hobe. E khela shesh hobe Bharatbarsha joy kore* (A new '*khela*' (game) has begun in Bhabanipur; it will end only when India has been won)." The TMC (Trinamool Congress) chief has lately been hammering home the message that her party won't rest on its laurels; after the triumph in the Bengal assembly election, its sights are now set on Delhi. At the same meeting, TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee said it even more baldly: "Remember, you are not just voting for Didi; you are voting for change in Delhi."

There are two simultaneous campaigns in play here: the first is to build a loose-knit Opposition coalition to take on the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha election; the second is to pitch Mamata Banerjee as the leader of that grouping. Over the past month or so, TMC heavyweights have sought to encourage discussion on who is best placed to lead. Highlighting the fact that the TMC's electoral pushback against the BJP was easily the most credible—notably, in the face of an all-out Modi/ Shah-led offensive at the polls—TMC leaders like Abhishek have begun to talk up Mamata's claim over potential contenders. They describe Congress leaders, for instance, as having either accepted defeat or gone into hiding. Their new

assertiveness could easily damage a fragile opposition unity, but the TMC leaders reckon it's time for Mamata to make her play for the top spot.

On several counts, the BJP is currently on the back foot—fuel prices are at record highs, inflation is surging and the past year and a half of the pandemic have caused deep economic distress. This, some argue, is sure to stoke anti-incumbency and is as good an opportunity as Mamata will get to present herself as an alternative to the BJP. As Rajya Sabha MP Sukhendu Sekhar Ray points out, a similar situation existed in the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha election, when the scam-ridden UPA-II was battling a strong wave of anti-incumbency that ultimately led to its defeat. At the time, the BJP had taken advantage of the crisis to present Narendra Modi as a leader who could usher in "*acche din*", describing him as a successful three-term chief minister and hyping up the Gujarat model of development as the panacea for India's economic troubles. The TMC is following a similar playbook—the tagline in this instance is "*Bharat nijer meyekei chaaye* (India wants its daughter)."

Although Mamata has so far avoided openly claiming leadership of the potential opposition alliance, she has alluded to the possibility in her statements about West Bengal showing the way. Immediately after her big victory in a bitterly fought assembly election, she declared: "Bengal has saved India." Jawhar Sircar, TMC Rajya Sabha MP and former CEO of Prasar Bharati, says this election victory has undeniably given her a national stature. "Prime Minister Modi visited West Bengal 18 times; Union home minister Amit Shah 21 times. They made the election a life-or-death issue. Mamata is banking on this phenomenal victory to energise the opposition, which looks rattled by raids [by central investigative agencies at the behest of the BJP]. She isn't one to be cowed down." In this context, Mamata's 'Trinamool *hi kaafi hai* (Trinamool can take on the BJP by itself)' slogan is a half-challenging prod at other opposition parties to crank up their campaigns against the BJP.

Sircar says he doesn't see anything wrong with the TMC's aggressive rhetoric, seemingly aimed at the Congress. "Mamata does not hide [her belief] that the Congress needs to be more energetic," he says. Ray makes a similar point, saying Mamata has been trying to quickly unify the Opposition because she believes delays will only benefit the BJP. "We cannot afford to sit and wait for the Congress to become more active," he says. "The big question is not who's leading; the bigger issue is the need to come together under one banner to fight the BJP."

What is also true is that many political leaders appear disillusioned with the Congress leadership, leaving the field open for Mamata to claim the top spot. Luizinho Faleiro, Congress veteran and former two-term chief minister of Goa, is one of those who crossed over to the TMC. "Mamata has already proved she can defeat the BJP," he said on September 29 after meeting the TMC chief at state headquarters Nabanna. "It's time we projected a new leader who can show the country a new direction."

The psychological import of the West Bengal victory is indeed huge. Despite the fact that the TMC has a negligible national presence and no MLAs in other parts of the country, many political observers already see the TMC as much more than a regional party. The recent crossovers have only burnished the party's new reputation. For instance, simply winning over Faleiro and 10 of his associates in Goa has made the party a player in the state. In Uttar Pradesh, it is trying to tie up with the Samajwadi Party. In home state Bengal, the Congress's Sushmita Dev and former BJP heavyweight Babul Supriyo have also crossed over. Developments like these indicate a tailwind backing Mamata as a national leader, though it's still early days.

MAMATA DOES TALK ABOUT BENGAL SHOWING THE WAY EVEN AS SHE AVOIDS OPENLY STAKING A CLAIM TO THE LEADERSHIP ROLE

In days to come, the TMC will try to further bolster Mamata's case by poaching as many senior leaders as it can and gain a political footprint in other states—especially the smaller ones, where it might be easier—even before it tries to win a handful of seats in assembly elections in these states over the next two years. Aside from Dev and Faleiro, who bring with them their own supporters, the TMC is also looking to induct leaders like Tripura's Pradyot Debbarma, leader of the state's largest indigenous group, TIPRA (The Indigenous People's Regional Alliance) Motha. "Mamata is going for people who will be vocal and create an impact in Parliament, besides making the voice of the TMC heard across the nation," says a TMC leader, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Mamata is also keeping channels open with the Congress's G-23 leaders via Abhishek Manu Singhvi and Kapil Sibal, who represent the state and the TMC as counsel in various cases. She

SIGNS OF THE TIMES
Mamata Banerjee with former Goa CM Luizinho Faleiro (L) in Howrah on September 29

ANI

has already won praise from other Opposition leaders—Manish Tewari has described her as 'Rani of Jhansi', while Ghulam Nabi Azad dubbed her the 'Lioness of the East'. Salman Khurshid described her victory in the West Bengal assembly election as "a relief and comfort", saying it showed there was "a need to return to the drawing board [to develop] a sustainable challenge to the BJP".

Political watchers say there is a strong possibility of a breakaway faction from the Congress joining with Mamata to challenge the BJP. Suggestions that she should spearhead an Opposition alliance are growing louder by the day, and if the TMC is able to win seats in state elections over the next two years—for instance, in Tripura, Goa or Meghalaya—those voices will likely become more assertive.

Leaders like Yashwant Sinha, who joined the TMC in March this year, after hibernating in Modi-Shah's BJP for the past eight years (he was a member of the saffron party from 1998 until he joined the TMC), make light of the fact that Mamata's party does not yet have electoral legitimacy as a national outfit. Himself a former Union minister, who held the critical finance and external affairs portfolios in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee cabinet, Sinha says he hasn't an iota of doubt about Mamata's leadership credentials. "Mamata has served for years in the central government in various capacities. She has a very clear understanding of the functioning of the central government. What experience did Modi have in finance or external affairs before becoming prime minister?" he asks. "Mamata is leagues ahead. Having served as a Union minister with a variety of portfolios, including railways, she has been part of the collective responsibility of the cabinet, which takes decisions on finance, external affairs and so forth."

Her experience as chief minister of West Bengal also means that she has a clear idea of the sort of governance she favours—a welfare state. Whether or not others agree with the model, it is a tried and tested one, with many schemes to her credit. These include Kanyashree (stipends for girls for higher education), Khadyasathi (subsidised rice rations), Swasthyasathi (family health insurance upto Rs 5 lakh), Lakshmi Bhandar (pronounced *Lokkhir Bhandar*; cash transfers to housewives), soft loans for students via a Students' Credit Card with a credit limit of 10 lakh, as well as pensions, unemployment doles and so on.

In prioritising her welfarism—it costs the state exchequer an estimated Rs 24,255 crore every year—Mamata is seen by her political adversaries as being cavalier about the state's finances, but Sircar insists this focus has not come at the cost of growth. "The GDP growth has been positive. And this is what a welfare state is," he says. "Building bridges or roads or capital assets benefits contractors, whereas Mamata's model benefits the poor." According to SBI Research, West Bengal's economy grew from Rs 13.5 lakh crore in FY2021 to Rs 15.1 lakh crore in FY2022. It still has a massive debt burden—about Rs 5.25 lakh crore. Another talked-about feature of her welfare model is the latter-day attempts to cut out middlemen and the need for citizens to visit administrative offices to claim benefits. The doorstep delivery of rations and other benefits, under schemes like 'Duare Sarkar' and 'Duare Ration', has been a big hit.

"This is a classic example of decentralising administration, bypassing intermediaries," says Prasanta Ray, social scientist and professor emeritus of Presidency University. "By launching Duare Sarkar three months before the assembly election, Mamata restored people's faith in her administration. The massive participation of women in the electoral process and the social welfare schemes effectively sealed the BJP's fate in Bengal."

Another way in which Mamata posits her case as a strong yet radically different alternative to Modi's BJP is in her public avowals of commitment to India's 'socialist, secular, democratic' identity, as enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution. "While Mamata can rattle off *shlokas* (from Hindu religious scriptures), she can also quote from the Quran, the Guru Granth Sahib and recite Urdu couplets with ease. She has made it clear that her religion is humanism," says Sircar. She may share a dictatorial streak with her primary adversary, but that inclusive vision of India does stand as a stark alternative to the new normal in Modi's India. ■

LAKHIMPUR KHERI KILLINGS

SUGAR BOWL ON THE BOIL

By Ashish Misra

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The historic Gurdwara Kodiwala Ghat in Nighasan tehsil of district Lakhimpur Kheri is a major pilgrimage centre for the Sikhs settled here in the Terai region in the foothills of the Himalayas. They believe it was built by their first guru, Nanak Dev. Special recitations and kirtans are organised here on the occasion of the new moon every month, with thousands of Sikh devotees coming in from the surrounding districts.

The new moon on October 6, though, was a sombre affair. The community was still in shock over the events from three days back (October 3) when a confrontation between farmers and a convoy of Ashish Mishra, son of Union minister of state for home Ajay Mishra 'Teni', led to the death of eight people, four of them farmers run over by Ashish's vehicle. The incident happened just 3 km from the gurdwara, on the Tikunia-Belraya road.

The farmers had been protesting against the Centre's new agricultural laws and the controversial remarks of Ajay Mishra who had, the previous week, said at a public function that he would "sort them out (*sudhaar doonga*)" if they didn't fall in line. The protesting farmers had gathered on October 3 at the helipad outside Tikunia town to wait for deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya, who was expected to land there before travelling to Banveerpur, Ajay Mishra's village, for a programme. Maurya cancelled the visit fearing the protests, but the minister's son Ashish and his cohorts, who had gone to receive the deputy CM, later ran into the protesters. According to eyewitnesses, Ashish's car drove into the farmers who were protesting peacefully on the road. The angry farmers then ransacked the vehicles in the convoy and set them on fire. News of the horrifying incident in Tikunia town, about 100 km from Lakhimpur Kheri, spread like wildfire. Soon, the countryside was up in arms.

The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh now has its back to the wall, especially with the assembly election due in February 2022, and a resurgent opposition sensing opportunity. Lakhimpur Kheri has now taken centre stage in the national opposition to the BJP: Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav sat on a dharna in Lucknow; Rakesh Tikait, of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), which is spearheading the anti-farm law protests, is negotiating for the deceased; the Congress's UP in-charge Priyanka Gandhi was arrested and put under house arrest in Sitapur as she was on her way to Lakhimpur Kheri; a Trinamool Congress delegation evaded the police to reach the area; the Aam Aadmi Party's vocal MP Sanjay Singh was detained. (Later, many of the leaders including the Congress's Rahul Gandhi were allowed to meet the victims.)

ALL 'SORTED'
Union MoS for home Ajay Mishra

After the Tikunia incident, the Yogi Adityanath government threw its full might into efforts to limit the damage. Internet was shut down in Lakhimpur Kheri and every road leading to the district was sealed. After six rounds of talks, an agreement was reached, with the government announcing an inquiry into the violence headed by a retired judge and promising Rs 45 lakh and jobs to the kin of the farmers killed. Twenty people, including Ashish Mishra, were booked under several sections of the CrPC, including murder, culpable homicide and rioting. They were still not arrested, though. But by the next day (October 5), the Yogi Adityanath government realised even this may not be enough as a video of Ashish Mishra's car crushing the farmers went viral on social media. The farmers' organisations were again on the boil, with leaders demanding the immediate arrest of Ashish and the dismissal of 'Teni' from the Modi cabinet at the Centre.

Ashish has since claimed in an

RETALIATORY RAGE
Remains of the SUV that ran over the farmers

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

LAKHIMPUR KHERI: THE POLITICAL STAKES

The area (36 assembly seats) almost certain to feel the political heat

- **LAKHIMPUR KHERI,** the 'sugar bowl' of UP, is the state's largest district, spread over **7,700** sq. km
- **80% FARMERS** here grow sugarcane
- **BJP SWEPT** the region in the 2017 assembly poll, **winning 32 of 36 assembly seats** that fall under 4 LS seats (Bareilly, Pilibhit, Aonla, Shahjahanpur) in Rohilkhand and 3 LS seats (Kheri, Dhaurahra, Sitapur) in Awadh
- **Brahmins 12% and Kurmis 15% are highly influential** in the 'blowback area', as are Sikhs, who comprise only 4% of the population but have disproportionate influence as they employ large tenant farmers

interview with India Today Group TV channel Aaj Tak that he wasn't present at the site. But Samyukt Kisan Morcha leader Tajinder Singh Virk, who was critically injured, says he is sure the minister's son was driving one of the cars.

Lakhimpur Kheri, bordering Nepal, is the largest district in UP, spread over 7,700 sq. km. But political analysts see signs of a big change in the politics of UP's 'sugar bowl' district (80 per cent of the farmers here grow sugarcane) after Tikunia. Retired professor Devidayal Awasthi, a resident of Lakhimpur Kheri, says, "There's a schism now among the Hindus and Sikhs. It's not a good sign for the BJP." There are 36 assembly seats in Rohilkhand and Lakhimpur Kheri and though the Sikh population is only around 4 per cent, they own large tracts of farmland and have a lot of influence over the tenant farmers of other castes. The BJP has to strike a balance between them and the two big Hindu castes—Kurmis (14 per cent) and Brahmins (12 per cent). In 2017, all three supported the BJP, a big reason why it swept the region.

Ajay Mishra entered politics in 1996 through the BJP's Yuva Morcha. Though he was the district panchayat president of Lakhimpur Kheri by 2005, he had to wait till 2012 to win an assembly election, becoming MLA from Nighasan. Two years later, he won the Kheri Lok Sabha seat and became an MP. He won again in 2019

THE BLOWBACK FROM TIKUNIA IS SEEN SINGEING THE BJP IN A REGION IT SWEPT IN THE 2017 ASSEMBLY POLL

and Prime Minister Narendra Modi included 'Teni' as the Union MoS for home in last July's cabinet expansion with an eye on the Brahmin votes in the Rohilkhand area. He has been very active since, taking out *'ashirvad yatras'* and holding more than three dozen meetings in Rohilkhand and surrounding districts, trying to connect Brahmin voters and farmers with the BJP. It was at one of these events, on September 25, that he made the controversial remarks.

The political future of Ajay Mishra and son Ashish alias Monu now looks bleak. Ashish was a contender for the Nighasan seat in 2017, but the BJP gave the ticket to Kurmi leader Ramkumar Patel instead. Patel won, but Ashish was again staking his claim for the seat in 2022. In fact, in the Nighasan assembly seat, graffiti and slogans such as *'Nighasan ki janata kare pukar, Monu bhaiya abki baar* (The people of Nighasan want Monu this time)' had become quite common in recent months. The SP's Anand Bhadauria, a member of the Legislative Council (MLC) from Rohilkhand, says, "Ajay and his son Ashish have been completely exposed. Ajay was a history-sheeter, now the people too know the reality." The Union minister defends himself saying he is the victim of a "conspiracy". "The high court ordered the closure of all cases against me. It is to my credit that I have never been jailed," he claims.

Political analysts believe the BJP's ploy—backing Ajay Mishra in a bid to corner the Brahmin votes—has backfired. Harinam Singh Verma, BKU vice-president, Awadh, says, "The farmers of Lakhimpur Kheri had come in large numbers for the kisan mahapanchayat in Muzaffarnagar on September 5, but after Tikunia, the district has become a stronghold of the anti-farm law movement." The BKU now plans to hold a farmer's chaupal in every block of eastern UP to "expose the brutality of BJP's leaders". Ajay Mishra, though, is still belligerent: "Not even five per cent of the farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri are against the new farm laws...in fact, support for the BJP has increased after the Tikunia incident."

The Lakhimpur MP also met Union home minister Amit Shah on October 6, and it appears the party is still backing him. Mishra may be ready to brazen it out but almost everyone else is aware that the Tikunia violence has set the stage for a big churn in UP's politics. ■

only books magazine

ENVIRONMENT

MISSION MANGROVE

By Kiran D. Tare

For the past 50 years, the surface temperature of the Arabian Sea off Mumbai's coast has been rising steadily, says a report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published in July. Another report by the World Resources Institute (WRI) India, published in August, says Mumbai is becoming warmer and has seen a substantial increase in extreme rainfall events in the past few years. Mumbai and Surat, it adds, will see regular floods if the problem is not contained.

The effects of climate change in Mumbai are becoming more stark with every passing year. As per the WRI report, Mumbai has been witnessing an increase in the number of 'extreme caution days'—when the temperature varies from 32 to 42 degrees Celsius. On average, Mumbai records 187 extreme caution days in a year and, in the past couple of years, has witnessed two to three days of extreme rainfall (above 200mm a day) during the monsoon. According to a study by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), a rising sea level will submerge about 70 per cent of south Mumbai by 2050. On August 5 this year, after heavy rains, south Mumbai was under five feet of water!

The alarming findings of the WRI and IPCC reports have brought back focus on Mumbai's neglected mangroves that protect and stabilise the city's coastline, which acts as a barrier against natural disasters. In 2019, a research paper, titled 'Mangroves in Mumbai', authored by Dr Leena Sarkar, a chemistry professor in Navi Mumbai's JVM College, highlighted the role of mangroves in "protect[ing] coastal areas from erosion, storm, surge and tsunamis".

As per state government records, almost 40 per cent of the state's mangroves, spread over 340 sq. km, were destroyed between 1995 and 2020 in construction activity. The rising clamour of environmental activists forced the state to create a mangrove cell in 2012 to protect the wetlands and mangroves across Maharashtra. The results were visible over the next five years: by 2017, the state's mangrove cover had increased by 82 sq. km, according to the Forest Survey of India. However, this increase was recorded mostly in forest land; the

THE INCREASE IN MAHARASHTRA'S MANGROVE COVER WAS MOSTLY IN FOREST AREAS; IN NON-FOREST AREAS, THEIR DESTRUCTION CONTINUES UNABATED

DWINDLING COVER

40%
Mangrove cover Mumbai has lost since 1995

20
of 35 species of mangroves found in India are in Maharashtra

114
MILLION
No. of years over which mangroves evolved in the Indo-Malaysian area

6.4%
Maharashtra's share of India's 4,975 sq. km mangrove cover. The length of Maharashtra's coastline is 72

A DEFENSIVE WALL OF GREEN
A view of Mumbai's mangrove-lined coastline at Vasai creek of Mira-Bhayandar, Mumbai

https://t.me/joinchat/JcIzIBXyFAE5Yjc1

destruction of mangroves in non-forest areas did not abate.

Environmental activist Debi Goenka, executive trustee of the Conservation Action Trust, has been demanding the handover of mangrove lands to the forest department, but so far to no avail. Stalin D., director of NGO Vanashakti blames it on real estate developers. "Every housing project is possible even if due attention is paid to conservation of mangroves," he says.

Graphic by ASIT ROY

Beginnings of Change

The Maharashtra government woke up to the emergency after two cyclones—Nisarga (2020) and Tauktae (2021)—battered the state's coastline. The state-affiliated Mangrove and Marine Biodiversity Conservation Foundation, which implements mangrove and marine biology conservation initiatives, is studying the effectiveness of mangroves as a buffer against cyclones. In September, the foundation approved a plan to instal 279 CCTV cameras in three phases at 106 mangrove locations in Mumbai and around the Mumbai Metropolitan Region to keep an eye on the mangroves. Sensitive mangrove locations in Bhiwandi and Mira-Bhayander have been picked for Phase I of the CCTV installation initiative, according to Virendra Tiwari, additional principal chief conservator of forests, mangrove cell. Phase II will cover the western suburbs like Charkop and Phase III the eastern suburbs and Navi Mumbai. Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has also approved mangrove research and training centre at Wadala.

Gujarat in Line

Environmental activists in Gujarat, too, are betting on mangroves to save their population of 'swimming camels' located in three talukas of Kutch district—Bhachau, Abdasa and Lakhpat. The Kharai camels are the only swimming camels in the world and were identified by the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources as a 'distinct breed'. In 2019, they were tagged as 'endangered mammals' in the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) classification of endangered species. According to Ramesh Bhatti, programme director, Sahajeevan, a Bhuj-based environmental protection NGO, Gujarat has 4,000 Kharai camels, of which some 2,000 are to be found in Kutch alone.

The Kutch Camel Breeders Association sent a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month to bring to his attention the need to conserve the state's mangrove cover—the only grazing areas for these camels—which is dwindling due to human activity.

Maharashtra is taking measures to revive its depleting mangroves, and the CM has ordered an inquiry into the complaints of mangrove destruction in Navi Mumbai and Raigad, but many activists feel not enough is being done. Ashwin Aghor, director, EnviroCare Welfare Society, says political patronage of squatters must end. "The government needs to empower the forest department to act against encroachers and violators," he says. ■

MADHYA PRADESH

WOOING THE TRIBALS

By Rahul Noronha

ANI

In recent months, a series of developments in Madhya Pradesh suggest that a new demographic—tribal voters—has risen to the top of the BJP's 'to woo' list. In March, the state government invited President Ram Nath Kovind to participate in a *janjatiya sammelan* (tribal convention) at Damoh in northeastern MP; on September 18, Union home minister Amit Shah travelled to Jabalpur to attend a function marking the 164th anniversary of the martyrdom of tribal heroes Shankar Shah and his son Raghunath in the 1857 uprising. Chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has also been regularly touring tribal-dominated districts on the state's eastern and western flanks, frequently announcing new schemes for these communities.

Madhya Pradesh has a tribal population of about 20 million, or 21 per cent of the state's population. Of MP's 230 assembly seats, 47 are reserved for Scheduled Tribes (STs), as are six of its 29 Lok Sabha seats. That this demographic can make or break governments is a fact not lost on political parties—in 2013, the BJP won 30 of these 47 seats and formed the government; in 2018, it was the Congress that won 30/47 seats, forming the state government for the first time in 15 years. (That victory was short-lived, though—the Kamal Nath-led Congress government collapsed after the defection of Jyotiraditya Scindia and his loyalists to the BJP, and was replaced by one led by Shivraj Singh Chouhan.)

The BJP's tribal push—a multi-state affair—includes several announcements from the party's state and national leadership. For one, while in Jabalpur, Union home minister Shah announced that the Centre will spend Rs 200 crore to set up nine museums across India to honour tribal leaders, including one in MP's Chhindwara, focused on Shankar and Raghunath Shah. Explaining this, the BJP's state secretary, Rahul Kothari, says, "Our party is trying to bring the *vanvasi* (forest dweller) community into the mainstream. Reviving the histories of tribal icons is a step we have taken in this direction." The same day, CM Chouhan also announced that tribal villages that did not have fair price shops will have rations delivered to weekly *haats* (markets) using vehicles rented from locals. The party hopes these efforts will yield political dividends. At a meeting of the party's state ST morcha a few days before Shah's visit to Jabalpur, Union minister of state for steel and rural development Faggan Singh Kulaste said: "The morcha should help the party secure tribal support."

ON SEPT. 18, HOME MINISTER SHAH SAID THE CENTRE WILL SPEND Rs 200 CRORE ON MUSEUMS TO HONOUR TRIBAL LEADERS

The BJP has also been promising more autonomy for tribal areas—at the same meeting, CM Chouhan said the state would improve its implementation of the Centre's PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act. In February, the state government constituted a committee with members from the state's Tribal Research Institute, the tribal welfare department, panchayat and rural welfare department and forest department to examine how this could be done. It identified two ways in

ANI

SONG AND DANCE
Former CM Kamal Nath at a protest in Bhopal on August 9 (left); and Union home minister Amit Shah with MP chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Jabalpur on September 18

which gram sabhas in scheduled areas could be given greater autonomy—by allowing them to keep a percentage of the income from non-timber forest produce (a.k.a. minor forest produce, such as tendu leaves), and by allowing them to adjudicate minor disputes.

The CM now has to take a call on whether these are to be implemented. This is a difficult decision, not least because the state bureaucracy is dead set against these proposals. The income-sharing plan has some financial impact as well on the state exchequer. The state produces around Rs 12,000-15,000 crore worth of non-timber forest produce every year. "If the non-timber forest produce business is handed over to gram sabhas, the government will not only lose revenue, but also the ability to extend political patronage, which it does every year in the form of wages and bonuses," says an official from the forest department. He adds that it will also be seen as a victory for leftist groups opposed to the BJP, who have been demanding robust implementation of the PESA Act.

Activists and opposition parties—notably the Congress—have also questioned the timing of this push for greater implementation of PESA provisions. While MP is supposedly one of 10 PESA-compliant states in India (it has implemented some provisions relating to land acquisition, the management of water bodies, etc.), it hasn't yet formulated rules for its implementation. In effect, when other laws are in conflict with PESA, the latter takes a backseat. It also means there is no way of penalising agencies, departments or officials that/who do not abide by its provisions. "The BJP should explain why, despite being in power for more than 15 years, it did not implement PESA earlier," says Congress state spokesperson Bhupendra Gupta.

Political observers say the BJP's sudden embrace of PESA is born out of concerns that it is losing political space to tribal formations like the Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti (JAYS) and the resurgent Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP). While JAYS has emerged as a powerful force in western MP, the GGP is trying to regain ground in eastern MP and Mahakoshal. The BJP sees JAYS as the Congress's B-team—in the 2018 assembly election, JAYS member Hiralal Alawa contested and won on a Congress ticket. Similarly, the Congress sees the GGP as the BJP's B-team.

Meanwhile, the Congress has also been fighting to keep its tribal support base intact—for instance, in 2019, then-chief minister Kamal Nath had announced a waiver of all loans taken by tribals. "There are concerns within the party that the cultural agenda of the BJP and RSS has found takers in SC (Scheduled Caste) communities, which has led to a weakening of their links with the Congress," says a senior Congress functionary. "However, tribals are still Congress supporters." Among the party's traditional vote banks, tribals remain its staunchest supporters—there are even murmurs of protest among the state's Muslims (making up about seven per cent of the population) that the Congress does not come to their defence when they are attacked by right-wing Hindu groups. Consequently, parties such as the AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen) and the SDPI (Social Democratic Party of India) have found some traction as potential alternatives.

With byelections to three seats coming up—including in Jobat, reserved for STs—there is increased focus on such issues. In recent weeks, the Congress has raised the issue of attacks on tribals across the state. One such took place in end-August in Neemuch, when a tribal was assaulted by eight men in a roadside altercation, and then tied to the back of a vehicle and dragged some distance till he died.

Even as both the BJP and the Congress pose as champions of the tribal cause, data from the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) paints a picture worse than neglect. The Bureau's annual 'Crime in India' report highlighted a 25 per cent increase in atrocities against tribals—2,401 cases were registered in 2020, up from 1,922 cases in 2019. ■

ANDHRA PRADESH

GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

By Amarnath K. Menon

Every month, between the 1st and the 3rd, the Andhra Pradesh government pays out pensions to 6.1 million beneficiaries under the YSR Pension Kanuka, spending a staggering Rs 1,420.5 crore. The pensions are delivered to beneficiaries wherever they might be, even those displaced from their homes. For transparent, well-targeted delivery of benefits, the state relies on biometric identification.

Timely distribution of pension is one of 541 services—including the handouts under 30-odd welfare schemes—the Andhra Pradesh government provides through its elaborate village and ward secretariat network. This entails the distribution of about Rs 1 lakh crore a year. Apart from pensions, these services include rice cards, the Aarogyasri health cover cards, house documents, caste and income certificates, all of which are provided by the 11,162 village secretariats—and 3,842 ward secretariats in urban areas—within a stipulated time. Assisting the citizens is an army of volunteers, each of them catering, on average, to 50 households. They survey the households and help citizens connect with government functionaries at the village level.

The system, introduced by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on October 2, 2019, marks a paradigm shift in decentralised administration and grassroots governance. The government's welfarist outreach is not without political calculation. The idea, it appears, is to ensure that every single citizen—of any caste, religion, region, gender or political affiliation—is a beneficiary of some government scheme or service. The village secretariats even handle grievances, and the saturation strategy will no doubt have electoral payoffs as well. A *gram* (village) volunteer/ ward volunteer and village secretariat/ ward secretariat department (GVWV & VSWS department) drives the citizen-centric delivery model. A joint collector oversees the work at all 13 district headquarters.

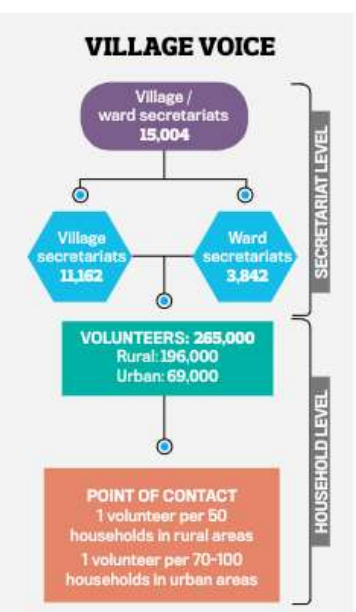
A village secretariat caters to a population of about 2,000 in the countryside while a ward secretariat looks after about 4,000 in urban areas. All village and ward volunteers are provided with smart phones (the state has distributed 270,000 devices) and fingerprint scanners. This communication channel also enables the government to launch swift surveys with information generated at the state level in a couple of hours. Covid advisories, feedback on implementation of schemes, survey of the impact of a programme and other messages are transmitted to 12 million-plus households in very little time.

CM Jagan Reddy's 'saturation' welfarist outreach, where every citizen gets the benefit of some government scheme or the other, will pay off electorally

"Reaching the citizens has become very easy. They no longer have to go to the mandal, district or divisional office to sort out issues. The volunteer visits them at their doorstep and the physical point of contact is a government official at the village or ward secretariat," explains Ajay Jain, special chief secretary, GVWV & VSWS department. He points out that delivery of various schemes and service timelines are specified and monitored using online dashboards on a month-to-month basis.

Even the choice of beneficiary for a particular scheme is done at the village/ ward level. For transparency, the names of those picked (with the help of

FOR THE PEOPLE
Citizens at the Narendrapuram village secretariat, East Godavari district



Graphic by ASIT ROY

the volunteer door-to-door survey) are displayed publicly for social audit. For the benefit of those left out of a scheme, eligibility norms and procedures for enrolment are displayed in the village/ ward secretariat.

Consequently, the flow of visitors to the district collectors' offices and the state secretariat has fallen sharply. Earlier, some 3,000 visitors, mostly women, would turn up typically on Mondays to either seek redress of grievances or claim benefits under some scheme. The availability of government functionaries at the village level has made a big difference in devolution of powers. First started by ex-chief minister, the late N.T. Rama Rao of the Telugu Desam Party, who had taken decentralisation to the mandal level from the block/ tehsil, Jagan has taken devolution further down to the lowest level possible.

"The CM's vision is that no eligible person should be left out and no ineligible person should be included while ensuring tight timelines in implementation," says Jain. Apart from the village panchayat secretary, it is mandatory for village-level government functionaries to be present at the local secretariat between 3 and 5 pm every working day. The biometric attendance of these 140,000 employees is tracked on a dashboard. For this, exclusive village secretariat offices have been set up with digital connectivity.

However, the volunteers, who are provided a smartphone and Rs 5,000 a month as salary, are unhappy. Two years after the new structure came into being, they were hoping to be absorbed as government employees. But all that the cash-strapped state can offer as motivation is performance-linked cash incentives on the occasion of every Ugadi (the Telugu New Year) in March-April. Moreover, if the volunteer indulges in corruption or nepotism, citizens can call the toll-free number 1902 and register a complaint.

Meanwhile, several states have sent delegations to understand how this devolution model works in order to assess if it could be cost-effectively implemented in their own states for better delivery of government benefits and services. The ruling YSRC believes the system has contributed significantly to its electoral success in the local body elections. "Jagan has been successful in building an image of a man who keeps his promises. That impression is a political plus. He is also seen as pro-poor and responsive to citizen needs," says political commentator Ravi Komarraju. "The big challenges he faces relate to state finances and retaining the confidence of the people."

While the state's overextended finances are indeed a challenge for Jagan, economist K.C. Reddy argues that the revolutionary village secretariat system has the potential to win the state global recognition. "This strategy," he says, "can be implemented nationally after a scientific study. People have been talking about strengthening local administration ever since the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution were passed in 1992, but most of it has been confined to election manifestos." ■

BOOKS

THE GREAT INDIAN PARADOX

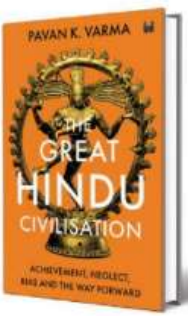
By Rajmohan Gandhi

This book confirms the breadth of the author's interests. Whether it is the paintings, dance or sculpture of ancient India, the wonders of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the wisdom of the Upanishads, or something else, Pavan K. Varma's *The Great Hindu Civilisation* provides confident observations. What also comes across is Varma's pride in Hindu civilisation. However, rage is this book's strongest note. Rage at the under-appreciation of this civilisation by Indians themselves.

Offering, too, a hurried tour of Indian history, the book contains surprising errors. Varma writes (p. 196) that Aurangzeb "assassinated the last Sikh Guru Gobind Singh". Aurangzeb had died in February 1707, 20 months *before* Guru Gobind Singh was stabbed to death in Nanded. After correctly quoting Gandhi to the effect that even if all other Hindu and non-Hindu texts in the world disappeared, one short verse in the Isha Upanishad would suffice for his soul, Varma gives us (p. 320) the wrong verse!

Not many will agree with Varma's description of Ram Mohan Roy as "an important ally" for the British, or with the book's downplaying (pp. 250-52) of the pernicious *sati* custom, against which Roy had applied his fearless mind and all his energies. Indignant at the success of Macaulay and company in "anglicising" the minds of the Indian elite, Varma underestimates both the pioneering greatness of men like Roy and the unfortunate prestige that was given to *sati*. Ten years after British India had made *sati* illegal, when Ranjit Singh died in his Lahore kingdom, four of the Maharaja's ranis and seven of his slave-girls ascended the pyre to be burnt alive.

I cannot complain that Varma's book omits this 1839 episode. How many events can one book cover? In any case, the bulk of this book is about the grandeur of Hindu civilisation and the damage done to it first by Islamic rule from the end of the 12th century and then by British rule from the middle of the 18th.



THE GREAT HINDU CIVILISATION
Achievement, Neglect, Bias and the Way Forward
By Pavan K. Varma
WESTLAND
₹799; 403 pages

Varma's condensation of Hindu civilisation's achievements is formidable. He underlines the civilisation's intellectual character. An early chapter is called 'The Audacity of Thought'. Whether in religion, art, or politics, the ancient Hindu mind was bold. Hinduism distinguished itself, the author points out, through dissent and debate, not by its dogmas. In the Mahabharata, he reminds us, pragmatism joins moral challenge, turning its heroes and gods into fallible and even deceiving human beings.

In politics, not only did the Mauryans create a pan-Indian empire three centuries before the common era and the Guptas a similar if smaller kingdom from about 400 CE, political theorists like Chanakya laid out the principles of empire, governance, taxation, espionage and war.

Who can resist being awed? But questions too arise irresistibly, and it's a pity that Varma ignores them altogether. Given all the wisdom he summarises, why was a stable pan-Indian polity such a rarity in the several millennia of this astonishing civilisation? Even when no invading Turks, Arabs or Europeans were around? When invasions did come in later centuries, why was resistance so ineffective?

The audacity of Indian thought included a respect for ideas, even sharply dissenting ones. But respect for fellow human beings was in short supply. This Varma refuses to admit. While wonderstruck by the feats of Hindu civilisation and upset that these are not recalled enough, Varma will not dwell on the inhumanity of untouchability and the hierarchies and exclusions that our society has permitted for centuries.

Varma's concluding chapter is on "The Modern Republic". He acknowledges the roles of Gandhi and Nehru, airs criticisms of the two, and also criticises the idea of a Hindu *rashtra*, while finding much to praise too in the RSS and Savarkar. He seems somewhat troubled by the tolerance of coercion against the weak in today's India. But these misgivings are expressed softly, even hesitantly.

What attracts this book's unreserved passion is the presumed neglect of our great civilisation. In the India and world of 2021, this exclusive focus seems odd. ■

Rajmohan Gandhi *is a historian and author of books such as* **Modern South India** *(2018) and* **Why Gandhi Still Matters** *(2017), among others*

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

WILL HE, WON'T HE?

West Bengal chief minister **Mamata Banerjee's** search for a finance minister to replace the unwell incumbent Amit Mitra seems to have hit a roadblock. There is much speculation in political circles, though, over Ashok Lahiri, seen as a likely candidate for the post. Lahiri, a BJP MLA and former chief economic advisor in the Union finance ministry, has ruled out joining the TMC saying he is happy where he is, but his absence at a recent meeting of BJP leaders from North Bengal triggered rumours of his exit. Even while denying the speculated move to TMC, Lahiri says he is not averse to occasionally advising the state government on the economy. Should the BJP panic?

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

Saying It with Slippers

Mamata Banerjee's rubber slippers—her trademark footwear—could be competing with her party's twin-flowers symbol for salience among her fans and followers. The TMC workers celebrating her Bhabanipur bypoll victory were seen taking selfies with white and blue slippers. Talk about star power.

OUT OF STATE

Senior Congress leader **Harish Rawat** has had enough of the state under his charge—Punjab. After being caught in the crossfire between Captain Amarinder Singh and Navjot Singh Sidhu, Rawat is now stuck between Sidhu and CM Charanjit Singh Channi. He was also ticked off by the party high command for announcing that the Captain would lead the party in 2022. Rawat now wants out, in order to focus on the upcoming Uttarakhand poll. The Congress has heard his plea and the buzz is that a Rajasthan minister will replace him in Punjab.

-Sandeep Unnithan with Romita Datta, Amarnath K. Menon, Amitabh Srivastava and Anilesh S. Mahajan

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

A Different Common Cause

Bihar chief minister **Nitish Kumar** must regret taking RJD leader **Tejashwi Yadav** to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi as part of an all-party delegation to press the PM for a caste census. He even credited Tejashwi for taking the initiative. But now the young RJD leader has apparently written to the CM to lead another all-party delegation to Modi to discuss flood relief and drought. Nitish says he hasn't received any letters from him. Has he checked his junk mail folder?

SWARM TACTIC

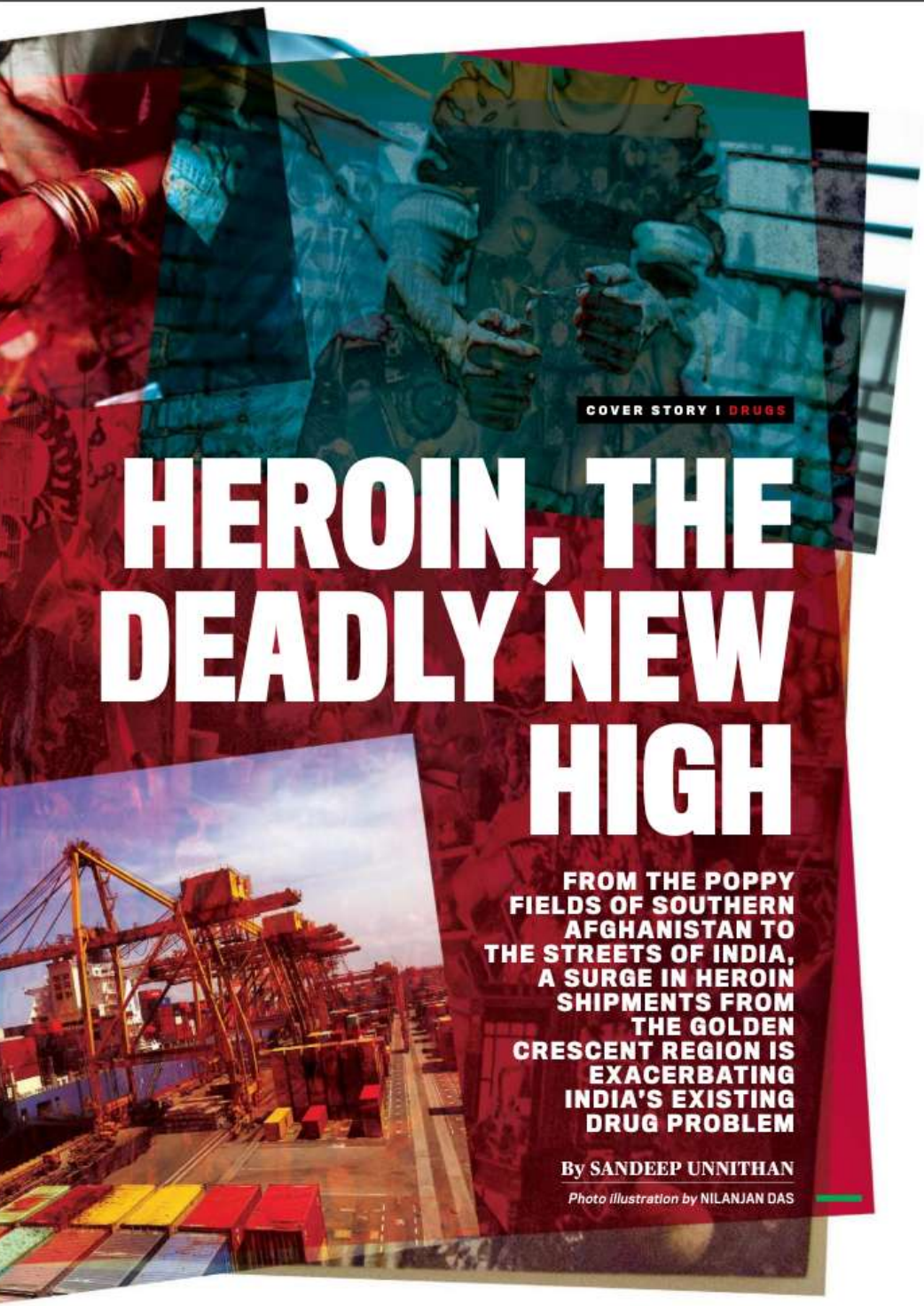
In 2019, about 500 protesting turmeric farmers had contested the Lok Sabha poll from Nizamabad, Telangana, and the 100,000 or so votes they collectively polled led to the defeat of TRS's K. Kavitha, CM K. Chandrashekar Rao's daughter. The unemployed youth of the state are now borrowing from the farmers' playbook and several among them are filing nominations for the upcoming Huzurabad assembly bypoll with the aim to defeat the TRS as well as **Eatala Rajender**, an ex-TRS leader now contesting on a BJP ticket.

HEROIN, THE DEADLY NEW HIGH

FROM THE POPPY FIELDS OF SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN TO THE STREETS OF INDIA, A SURGE IN HEROIN SHIPMENTS FROM THE GOLDEN CRESCENT REGION IS EXACERBATING INDIA'S EXISTING DRUG PROBLEM

By SANDEEP UNNITHAN

Photo illustration by NILANJAN DAS



THE TWO RUST-BROWN SHIPPING containers from Iran were among thousands stacked in neat rows like toy bricks in India's largest seaport, Mundra. For the Department of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) officials who had zeroed in on the shipment, these 20-feet-long containers originating in Iran's Bandar Abbas port and dispatched to Gujarat's arid Kutch district, were like two needles in a very giant haystack. The port receives 5.6 million such containers each year. However, it was the consignor that piqued the sleuths' interest—Hasan Husain Ltd, a firm based in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan. The shipment of talc stones, a clay mineral used as raw material for cosmetics, was headed for Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh and meant for a Chennai-based couple, Machavaram Sudhakar and his wife Vaisali. When DRI sleuths opened the containers on September 15, they spotted hundreds of white synthetic bags, each large enough to seat an adult. Beneath the loosely-packed talc stones was 3.2 tonne of pure Afghan heroin. It was one of India's largest drug hauls. The quantity was, as one government official put it, enough to drug Mumbai's 12 million citizens. The drugs would have sold on the streets of Mumbai for some Rs 3,000 crore. With the Mundra seizures, the total heroin haul this year has crossed six tonne, double the 3.2 tonne and 3.8 tonne seized in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

A 2019 report by the Union ministry of social justice and empowerment pegs opioid use in India at 2.06% of total drug use, thrice the global average of 0.7%

The Mundra shipment set alarm bells ringing in India's security establishment. It confirmed the worst fears of India's drug control authorities—the flood of Afghan heroin has turned into a tidal wave. It cannot be good news in a country where opioid consumption is 2.06 per cent of total drug use, three times the global average of 0.7 per cent. This was a finding in a 2019 report, 'Magnitude of Substance Use in India', by the Union ministry of social justice and empowerment.

"India is a heavy consumption point, transit point and supply route," says Satya Narayan Pradhan, director-general of the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), the nodal agency for enforcing India's drug laws (*see interview*).

The social justice ministry's 2019 report, the first of its kind, mapped the extent of India's drug abuse problem. Over 50 million Indians, it said, were hooked on drugs. "That's a huge market and growing. It is a huge pull for any drug supplier," says Pradhan.

THE SUPPLY SPURT

The heroin recovered in Mundra began its journey in Afghanistan, a thousand kilometres to its northwest, in a region drug enforcement circles have christened the 'Golden Crescent'. This swathe, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, accounts for 83 per cent of the worldwide production and distribution of opiates. The sticky brown resin is scraped off the bulbs of poppy plants, refined in drug labs first as opium and then into a crystalline white powder that we know as heroin. The powder is packed and sent through Europe, Central Asia and South Asia to

"FIFTY MILLION DRUG ADDICTS IS A HUGE PULL FACTOR"

Satya Narayan Pradhan, Director General, Narcotics Control Bureau, spoke with Group Editorial Director (Publishing) **Raj Chengappa** and Managing Editor **Sandeep Unnithan** about the danger revealed by huge drug busts like the one in Mundra, the threat of Afghanistan's booming opium production and the wide acceptance of drugs among the well-heeled, as shown by the Mumbai cruise liner case. Excerpts:

Q. How worrisome is the boom in Afghan opium production?

A. Opium production was rising even before the Taliban took over. There was a 37 per cent increase in the land under opium cultivation in 2019-20. It is now at an all-time high—224,000 hectares. Afghanistan accounts for 83 per cent of the world's opium production. This has increased over the years. The drugs flow in from Afghanistan and via ports along the Iranian coast. Even when the Afghans are pushing the stuff, they tie up with Pakistanis. It is the Pakistanis who are oiling the (drug smuggling) machine.

Q. What are the worries about the Mundra shipment? And what is being done to prevent a repeat of it?

A. The worry is that it could have happened several times in the past without us knowing about it. The jump [in shipment sizes] from 30 kilos to 3 tonnes was not sudden; it would have happened several times. They would have sent several 1,000 kg [shipments], maybe even 4,000 kilos. We have increased our coordination with other security agencies to detect such shipments.

Q. What challenges does this huge inflow of drugs pose for India?

A. There are three aspects to the problem—supply, transit and the consumers. India has all three—we are a heavy consumption point, we are a transit point and we are a supply route. We are looking at over 50 million users who are habitually dependent. That's a huge market and growing. That is a huge pull for any drug supplier.

Q. What are the parallels between the Sushant Singh Rajput case and the cruise liner case?

A. They are indicative of the fact that young people are graduating from alcohol to excitement of a different kind. It's a definitive change. For the new generation, if you don't do some kind of drugs, you're not 'with it'. There is peer pressure, and sometimes, consumers become petty traders to fund their habits.

Q. What are the new trends in drug smuggling post the pandemic?

A. Drug smugglers have started using courier agencies to deliver drugs and the DarkNet to carry out transactions. Post February 2020 and the courier boom, the delivery of drugs using couriers has gone through the roof. It is physically impossible for enforcement agencies to drill down and find the contents of small packets. We are also seeing traditional supply routes for smuggling shift southwards towards Rajasthan and Gujarat. ■

the veins and windpipes of an estimated 57.8 million users worldwide. When the heroin leaves Afghanistan, it has a value of around Rs 10,000 a kilo. By the time it reaches Mumbai, it is worth Rs 50 lakh. Halfway across the world, on the streets of New York, that same quantity, heavily adulterated, fetches upward of $133,000 or Rs 1 crore. This is what makes the drugs business so profitable.

In the 1980s, as the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan closed the Balkan route, heroin began to appear on the streets of Mumbai and Delhi. It was sold in these two of the largest consumption points in a heavily adulterated avatar, known as 'brown sugar' or 'smack'. Having tapered off in the 1990s, smack has reappeared in the past five years. "More people are addicted to low-cost heroin (smack), which is available at Rs 1,500 a gram," says Datta Nalawade, DCP, anti-narcotics cell, Mumbai Police. In Delhi, the street prices of one dose of smack can drop to as low as Rs 300. Supply fluctuations are plugged with baking soda adulteration. "The number of users has gone up, it is easily available, which means the market is flooded with the stuff," says a volunteer working with drug addicts.

The drugs travel along the borders. Trafficking of opiates takes place along the India-Pakistan international border; cannabis along the India-Nepal border and amphetamine type stimulant (ATS), methamphetamine (MD) and heroin take the Indo-Myanmar route.

One can only guesstimate the size of India's illegal drug business. One government agency pegs it at around Rs 30,000 crore (extrapolating from the Rs 3,000 crore worth drugs seized annually, assuming seizures account for 10 per cent of the trade). The business is profitable enough for drug cartels to constantly seek innovative ways to stay one step ahead of the law and ply their deadly business. NCB officials note how

RESURGENCE OF THE GOLDEN CRESCENT

INDIA IS NOW A BIG MARKET AND TRANSHIPMENT HUB FOR ILLICIT OPIUM. ADDICTION LEVELS AMONG OUR YOUTH ARE HIGH

DRUG SMUGGLING IS ON THE RISE

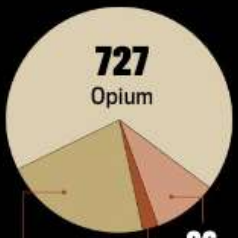
GLOBAL PRODUCTION
(in 2020; tonnes)

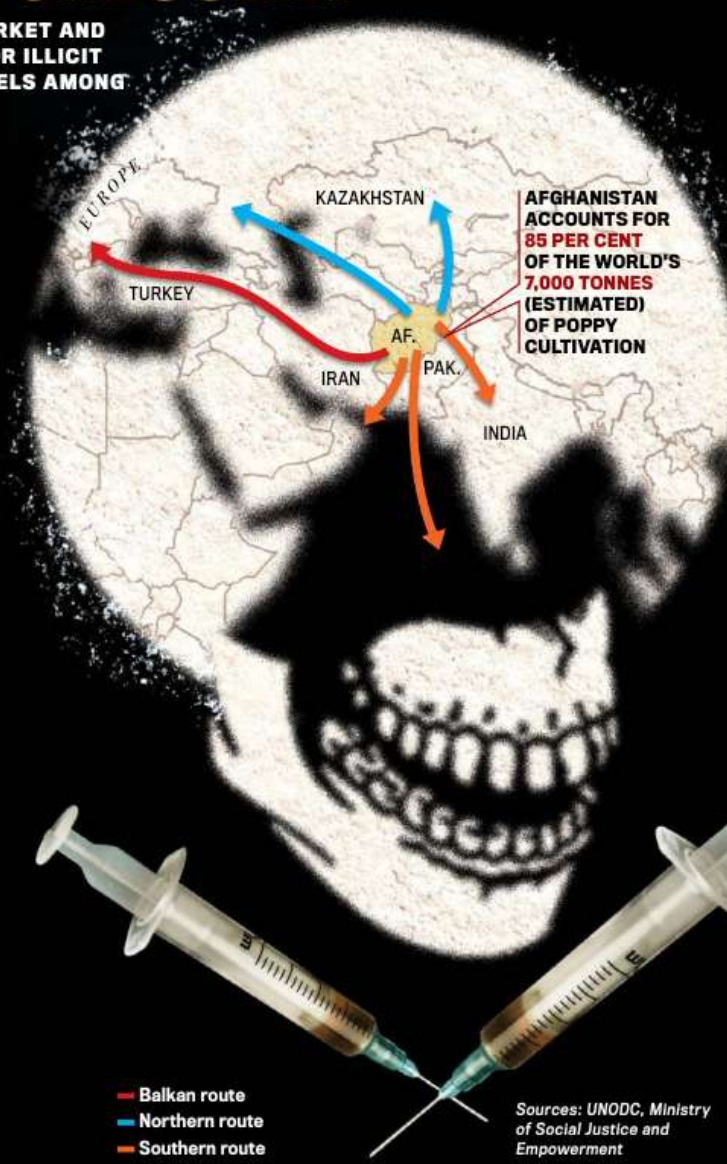
7,410
Opium produced

1,205-1,512
Consumed as opium

454-694
Heroin produced from opium

GLOBAL DRUG SEIZURES
(in 2019; tonnes)





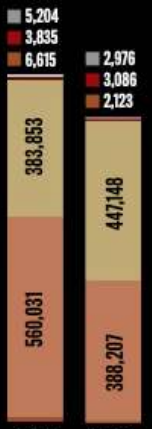
Sources: UNODC, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

RISING SEIZURES IN INDIA

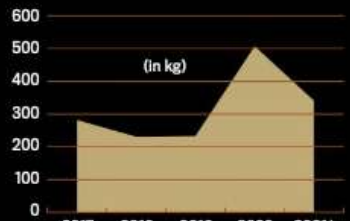
Major drug seizures by all agencies (kg)

- Opium
- Heroin
- Poppy straw
- Ganja
- Hashish



*up to August 31

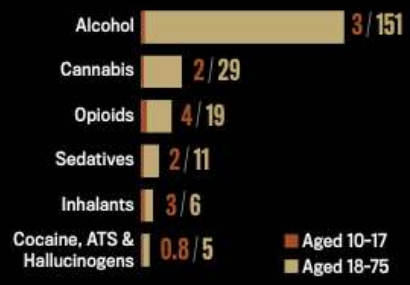
DRUG SHIPMENTS SEIZED ON THE PUNJAB BORDER



*up to September 20

DRUG CONSUMPTION BY AGE GROUPS

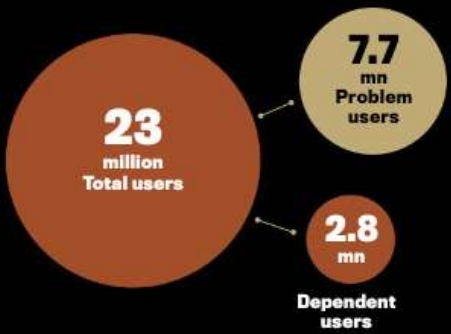
Estimated no. of users (millions) in India



DEADLY THREAT

OPIOIDS

- About 6 million have opioid use disorders
- Over half of India's opioid users are in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat
- States by percentage of population affected: Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur, Punjab, Haryana and Delhi



THE NEW MODUS OPERANDI

Post-Covid-19 trends in drug smuggling

Larger shipment sizes

Use of the dark web

Increased use of private aircraft

Increased use of waterway routes

Contactless methods to deliver drugs to end-consumers

MAXIMUM CITY, MAXIMUM WORRY

CELEBRITY DRUG BUSTS AND A WELL-OILED INTERNATIONAL TRAFFICKING NETWORK HIGHLIGHT A GROWING PROBLEM IN MUMBAI

On October 2, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) conducted raids at Mumbai's international cruise terminal just as some 1,000 guests were about to board a Goa-bound ship of the Cordelia Cruises company. Most of the guests were from the north Indian states, flown in by a Delhi-based company. Entry tickets apparently ranged from Rs 80,000 to Rs 3 lakh. The cruise ship was on the third leg of an international voyage.

The NCB officers, led by zonal director Sameer Wankhede, boarded the cruise ship as guests after a tip-off from a drug pedlar about a rave party being organised onboard. While conducting searches, they zeroed in on eight people, including Aryan Khan, 23, son of Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan, and his friends Arbaaz Merchant and Munmun Dhamecha. The agency did not find any drugs in Aryan's possession but claims he was under the influence. Aryan and Arbaaz had been given free VIP passes by the cruise company, hoping they would spread the word about the ship.

Till October 5, the NCB had arrested 16 people in the case, including four associated with an event management company. Aryan and his friends have been booked under Sections 27 (punishment for consumption of any narcotic drug or psychotropic substance), 8C (production, manufacture, possession, sale or purchase of drugs) and other relevant provisions of the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. The NCB claims it recovered 13 gm of cocaine, 5 gm MD (mephedrone), 21 gm charas and 22 pills of MDMA (synthetic drug

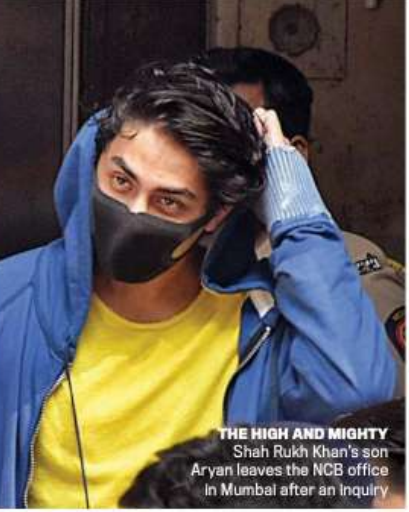
ANI

An officer with the narcotics wing of Mumbai Police claims the city consumes 500 kg of marijuana every month. The total illegal drugs market is said to be worth Rs 500 crore annually

drug traffickers are increasingly using the DarkNet—the part of the internet search engines cannot access—to fix deals. In 2019, a UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) report quoted a study that says more than 1,000 drug listings from India were published across 50 online cryptomarket platforms. The UN estimates major drug markets on the DarkNet to be now worth some $315 million (Rs 2,300 crore) annually. Smugglers have started using courier companies to ferry small packages to consumers. In August, the NCB busted a Kolkata-based drug smuggling network that was shipping high-grade marijuana across the world using the dark web.

The UNODC's June 2021 report notes how smuggling networks have bounced back from the pandemic and are now using contactless delivery, moving larger drug consignments by the sea route and private aircraft. Online sales have made access to drugs much easier than before. In South Asia, Indian government officials say, drug smugglers are moving their rendezvous points deeper into the ocean, into international waters using satellite phones to coordinate drops, evading law enforcement authorities.

The debilitating impact on society aside, these drug shipments have serious national security ramifications. A senior government official admits that such large heroin shipments would not be possible without the collusion of Pakistan's deep state. "Drugs are the new oil—they lubricate everything, from gun-running to terrorism and human trafficking," he says. Prem Mahadevan, a senior researcher with the Center for Security Studies at ETH, Zürich, believes a combination of factors is making India vulnerable to the inflow of drugs from the AfPak region. "Drugs



THE HIGH AND MIGHTY Shah Rukh Khan's son Aryan leaves the NCB office in Mumbai after an inquiry

methylenedioxy-methamphetamine) from some of Aryan's friends. If the charges are proved, they might face jail for a year. "Aryan was a surprise catch for us," says an NCB officer. "When we apprehended him, we did not know he was SRK's son." Khan's lawyer Satish Maneshinde has refuted reports that his client had even consumed drugs. The case against Aryan seems to rest on purported WhatsApp chats he had with a drug pedlar.

It was actor Sushant Singh Rajput's suicide on June 14, 2020 that brought the focus on the use of drugs by Mumbai's well-heeled. The actor's phone records showed that he had been in contact with a number of drug dealers. The October 2 arrests seem to indicate that drugs continue to be easily available in Mumbai. The NCB had made a number of high-profile arrests in the course of the Rajput case. It recently filed a 50,000-page chargesheet in the case which tries to paint a picture of an unholy nexus between Bollywood actors, their friends and the drug pedlars.

An officer with the narcotics wing of Mumbai Police claims the city consumes 500 kg of marijuana every month. The total illegal drugs market is said to be worth Rs 500 crore annually. Mumbai is considered a safe landing point for drugs and, combined with political patronage, has always been a magnet for the business.

Since September 2020, the NCB has registered 114 cases under the NDPS Act and arrested more than 300 people, including 34 foreigners and a few Bollywood stars for drugs consumption and peddling. The NCB claims it has so far dismantled 12 drug syndicates and recovered drugs worth Rs 150 crore from Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane and other parts of Maharashtra. Mumbai's swish set continues to drive demand and high retail prices. A gram of cocaine costs Rs 5,000 in Mumbai, almost double what it costs in Goa, say police officials. At least 2,499 kg of cocaine seized in the past two years in Sri Lanka, Port Elizabeth and Panama was bound for India, say NCB records. It also says that close to 300 kg of cocaine landed in Mumbai in December 2018 through a syndicate that has links in Australia and Canada. The drugs were not seized. Drugs smuggling is an enormously lucrative business—a kg of cocaine goes for Rs 5 crore in the international market.

The police have also noticed a changing pattern in drugs consumption. The consumption of MDMA has reached alarming levels in Mumbai and Goa.

The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) of the ruling Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi alliance government has accused the NCB of adopting a "selective approach". Party spokesperson Nawab Malik says the agency is only targeting the non-BJP-ruled states. But Wankhede refutes the allegation. "Our main aim is to dismantle organised drug syndicates. We don't have an agenda against anyone," he says.

–Kiran D. Tare

have historically been an instrument for the Pakistani ISI to carry out covert operations. Facilitation of drug trafficking compromises India's border security and generates funds for deniable paramilitary activities. Indian Punjab has been in the past, and continues to be, a prime battleground for ISI subversion as it is a strategically important state."

The government, therefore, has roped in the Indian Navy and Coast Guard to monitor the sea routes narcotics smugglers take. The navy, in particular, has the ability to monitor all major vessel traffic in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. A naval spokesperson reveals how they are monitoring vessels straying from 'set sailing patterns' or moving suspiciously. "Because our warships are now located at various points in the Indian Ocean Region, we have the ability to respond to suspicious contacts much faster," he says.

On April 19 this year, the Indian Navy warship INS *Suvarna* raided a Sri Lankan fishing trawler, the *Shenaya Duwa*, and recovered 300 kg of heroin off the coast of Kochi (street value: Rs 300 crore). The Afghan heroin was being transported down the 'southern route' and had been picked up by the five Sri Lankan nationals on the trawler. Earlier, on March 18, the Coast Guard had seized another 300 kg of heroin from three Sri Lankan trawlers in the Lakshadweep Sea off Kerala.

Despite the large seizures, doctors and health workers report that major Indian cities are now awash with synthetic drugs—from methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA) to heroin. "Brown sugar and heroin are back in circulation in a big way. It is largely a failure of our policing agencies—supply reduction has not been taken seriously," says Dr Harish Shetty, a social psychiatrist at the L.H. Hiranandani Hospital in Mumbai.

A DEADLY DEMAND

Adil (*name changed*), a bright-eyed 10-year-old from the east Delhi suburb of Kalyanpuri, has been away from home for three months. His father drives an e-rickshaw and his mother is a homemaker. He can't wait to see his parents again. But not his friends. "They got me into trouble...," he says. His distraught parents finally brought him to the three-storeyed de-addiction centre at Delhi Gate. Adil finally kicked his craving to 'chase' brown sugar.

There are 40 other juveniles at the de-addiction centre. "The victims are getting younger," says Dr Rajesh Kumar, executive director of the Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM), which runs three such centres in the national capital. "A few years ago, our youngest patients were 15-16 years old. Now, we frequently get 10-12-year-olds." Often banding together in small street gangs, they indulge in thefts to fuel their drug habit before their parents or police bring them to the centre. "I used to carry a blade," says Adil. "I'd attack people and snatch money so we could buy drugs."

The National Crime Records Bureau records this trend of young drug offenders. In a report released last month, it noted that cases registered against juveniles under the Narcotics & Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act rose 21 per cent on-year to 264 in 2020, from 23 in 2015 and 82 in 2010.

Of the 50 million drug users in India identified in the social empowerment ministry's 2019 report, 23 million consume opium extracts or opiates. Heroin is the most common, consumed by 18 million. Moreover, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat contribute more than half to the approximately 6 million people with opioid use disorders (harmful or dependent pattern) in the country.

Users inject, sniff, snort or smoke heroin. Highly addictive, the heroin enters the brain rapidly and binds to opioid receptors on cells located in areas that involve feelings of pleasure and pain and which control the heart rate, sleeping and breathing. The state of euphoria or the 'heroin rush' soon gives way to clouded mental functioning,

ANI

BREAKING THE NORTHEAST DRUG NEXUS

On June 17, a small team of police personnel from Khatkhati police station in Assam's Karbi Anglong district lay in wait of a "queen" at Janak Pukhuri, a small village bordering Nagaland. This wasn't a receiving party for royalty, though. They were waiting for Th. Paone, the "queen" of a drug empire. Though unsure if she would venture out on her own from her den in Nagaland's Dimapur, a mere 10 km away from Janak Pukhuri, the police hoped that their bait—an order through a decoy customer for a large consignment of drugs—would prove to be too enticing to ignore. By this time, the police had put in nearly three months of work to penetrate Paone's inner circle.

She eventually did arrive with 164 packets of heroin worth Rs 7 crore in a modest Maruti Alto. Dressed in traditional Manipuri attire, the soft-speaking, slightly-built Paone barely looked the part of a dreaded drug queen. But this 50-year-old was responsible for 60 per cent of all illegal drugs entering Assam via NH 36—connecting Dimapur and Nagaon in Assam—and NH 39, connecting Manipur's Moreh and Assam's Numaligarh.

Paone is among the 2,730 drug lords operating in the northeastern states who were arrested by the Assam police during a special drive against drugs launched after Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma took charge of the state in May. Within the first 100 days, the police had seized narcotics worth Rs 198 crore. The state has recorded a 65 per cent rise in the number of drug-related arrests in the first eight months of 2021 over the last year. However, the state government believes this might just be the tip of the iceberg. "If we assume the seized drug was just 10 per cent of the entire quantity smuggled into Assam, we can say that the trade in illegal drugs in the state is worth nearly Rs 5,000 crore annually," says Sarma.

A 2019 study by two JNU professors, based on the National Family Health Survey 2015-2016 (NFHS-4), found that, at 70.8 per cent, the prevalence of substance abuse among northeastern men is 20 percentile points higher than the rest of India. The region accounts for 8 per cent of India's total geographical area but 41 of the country's 272 districts vulnerable to drug addiction are in this region.

STATE PURIFICATION
Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma sets fire to seized drugs at a ceremony in Karbi Anglong district

This addiction is leading to an alarming rise in HIV cases in the northeast—the trend of intravenous use of drugs among those between 15 and 20 years being the key factor. A report by the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) last year found that the AIDS-related mortality per 100,000 population in India was estimated to be the highest in Manipur (36.86), followed by Mizoram (28.34) and Nagaland (26.20).

At the root of this drug menace is the region's geographical proximity to Myanmar which, along with Lao PDR and Thailand, belongs to the Golden Triangle of the drug trade. Northeast India shares a 1,643 km border with Myanmar, responsible for 95 per cent of the total opium production in the triangle and, according to the US Drug Enforcement Administration, 80 per cent of the heroin production in Southeast Asia and 60 per cent of the world's supply. As per the International Narcotics Control Board and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Myanmar is also one of Asia's main sources of illegal production of methamphetamine, or the "crazy drug" Yaba. Moreover, Myanmar supplying opium has led to a massive prevalence of opioid use in Northeast India. In states like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, over 20 per cent of the total population has used opioids at least once in a year, as opposed to the national average of just over 2 per cent, as per a 2019 report, 'Magnitude of Substance Use in India'.

Since 2018, the recovery of heroin has seen a surge of 485 per cent; the police seized 380 per cent more opium during the same period and more than 8 million Yaba tablets have been recovered in Assam in the past four years.

From Myanmar, narcotic substances reach Assam via various routes originating mostly in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The Assam government even claimed that a drug nexus operating in Mizoram had a role in the territorial clash between the two neighbouring states in August so as to divert the Assam Police's attention from the narcotics trade. Mizoram has denied the charge and claimed it made record seizures of methamphetamine earlier this year. However, there is an acknowledgement that Mizoram, with its shared borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh, makes it an easy transit route. Some drug producers also use the remote areas of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh for opium cultivation. Several mafia groups from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have also begun cultivating opium in Assamese districts like Barpeta, South Salmara and Kamrup. Since May, Assam Police has destroyed cannabis growing in 31 bighas of land and opium in 15 bighas.

Assam, though, is not the destination of the drug trade. Only a fifth of the drugs entering or produced in Assam are sold in the state. According to police sources, the state is used as a transit point by traffickers transporting drugs to other parts of India and to Bangladesh. And that's what makes the Assam government's drive against drugs significant beyond the geographical borders of the state. While it has found massive public support, the state police force has also earned some scepticism. Several critics have pointed out that Assam's low conviction rate in drug cases—just over one per cent against the national 42 per cent—is a big hurdle. A Rajya Sabha answer in 2020 revealed that only 10 of the 1,237 individuals arrested in 2019 were convicted. But Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta, director general of Assam Police, believes that the situation is set to improve dramatically. The police force is working on multiple corrective measures, such as the creation of four model FIRs to handle different situations of search, seizure and arrest, comprehensive training for investigating officers, circulation of detailed guidelines in all police stations and monitoring all drug-related cases by top level officers.

Since Himanta Biswa Sarma took over as chief minister in May, the Assam Police has arrested 2,730 drug lords operating in the northeastern states

But there are other worrying factors. The arrest of two police personnel, including a deputy superintendent of police, for their alleged involvement with drug traffickers, has led many to believe that the current operations are just targeting small players as the arrest of the kingpins may expose the nexus between the drug cartel and top officials. One police officer recounted how two of the most notorious drug lords in Badarpur and Patharkandi in Karimganj district, bordering Mizoram, have escaped the police despite adequate evidence against them. Even an internal report of Assam police acknowledges this possibility: "These arrests are an indication that there is a nexus between a section of law enforcement officials in these illegal activities...". Mahanta, however, is confident in his plans. "That we are not sparing even our own is a straight message to anyone involved in this heinous crime," he says.

In fact, to send a larger socio-political message, the Assam government conducted a two-day-long drugs disposal event at four locations in the state—Diphu, Golaghat, Nagaon and Hojai—all transit points for distribution of narcotics. Seized drugs worth Rs 170 crore were destroyed, with the CM himself setting them on fire. "There have been instances when seized drugs have made way to drug traffickers. By destroying these, the government has preempted that. It's also sending out a larger message," says a senior leader of the ruling BJP. While such spectacles may have earned the government social and political mileage, the success of the war against drugs in Assam will depend on sustained and transparent action.

–Kaushik Deka

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

THE LONG ROAD HOME Children at the SPYM drug de-addiction centre in New Delhi

eventually slowing down the brain and central nervous system. Sustained heroin usage damages the heart and lungs. "Heroin turns people into vegetables," says Dr Rajesh Kumar.

Highly-priced South American cocaine continues to be the drug of choice for a limited circle of high-society addicts. In April, the NCB called Mumbai the cocaine capital of India. The agency said that drug mafias from Nigeria and South American countries like Peru, Brazil and Chile were spreading their tentacles in India, especially in Mumbai. In August, the NCB busted a 'dial-a-drug' network being run at Palghar near Mumbai. The call centre was being operated from Nigeria. Customers got doorstep delivery of cocaine after paying online.

THE COUNTER-NARCOTICS TRIANGLE

A revenue-starved Afghanistan is perched at edge of the precipice of becoming a narco-state where the illegal drug trade permeates legitimate institutions. Indian drug control authorities believe the situation could worsen with more drug shipments coming in. A senior government official admits that the capacities of the states and Centre are severely limited when it comes to handling a drugs surge. He suggests the creation of a national drug management authority headquartered in Delhi with stakeholders right up to the district level for a coordinated war on drugs.

All global counter-narcotics campaigns rest on three pillars—supply reduction or disrupting the supply of drugs, demand reduction or trying to get people to go off drugs and harm reduction or ensuring the rehabilitation and recovery of drug addicts.

The NCB—the primary agency tasked with combating a transnational threat like drug trafficking—needs to be made more effective along the lines of a globally-deployed organisation like the US Drug Enforcement Agency. Technology and drug-related intelligence-gathering and analysis need to be beefed up to monitor drug shipments into India. The bureau sorely needs technical experts to monitor the DarkNet where the bulk of the drug deals take place. It needs to warn of new threats and patterns in the drug trade.

The UNODC report warns how Afghanistan is also becoming a major source for methamphetamine in the region. MDMA, also known as crystal meth, a powerful and highly addictive stimulant, is made in small clandestine laboratories and sells for Rs 2,700 a gram in India. It has displaced cocaine as the drug of choice among the well-heeled in certain metros.

Ajay Agnihotri, a former IRS official, says the drug agencies need to monitor major supply routes. "We need field intelligence from Afghanistan. The problem is that the DRI and the NCB have more staff in New York, London and Singapore than in places where we need boots on the ground," he says.

Given the scarce resources available to the government, experts say the priority should be to nab the big fish in the trade and go after problem drugs like MDMA, heroin and cocaine, not chasing pedlars. The Mundra smuggling network, for instance, was being monitored by an Afghan-origin kingpin based in Shimla with a network of associates across the country. (He is now in police custody and the case is being investigated by the NIA).

Romesh Bhattacharjee, a former DG of NCB, says this refocus can come about only when drugs like cannabis are decriminalised. "You have to change laws—you have to legalise consumption of plant-grown drugs. The government must distribute them so that there is no incentive left for smugglers and traffickers." A study of over 25,000 persons prosecuted under the NDPS Act in Punjab between 2001 and 2011 found that barely a dozen were traffickers, the rest were small pedlars and users.

Supply reduction must go hand in hand with another crucial side of the triangle—public awareness campaigns to reduce demand and make drugs less desirable. Last August, the Union ministry of social justice and empowerment launched a 'Drugs Free India' campaign targeting 272 districts that had the highest drug consumption. The campaign claims to have reached out to 120 million people, including women and children. A government-run helpline for counselling drug addicts has 12 primary counsellors answering over 2,000 calls each month. "The entire focus of Nasha Mukt Bharat is on the youth and adolescents," says Radhika Chakravarty, joint secretary in the ministry. "We are moving away from an institution-based approach like a government organisation or an NGO to a community-based one," she says. India's drug war will need all this and much more if it is to fight the growing scourge. ■

–with Kiran D. Tare

THE CAPTAIN'S OPTIONS

The former Punjab chief minister's exit from the Congress is all but certain, and what he does next is likely to reorder the state's political equations

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

BANDEEP SINGH

After three days of closed-door meetings with political leaders in New Delhi, former Punjab chief minister Captain Amarinder Singh returned to the state on September 30. Landing at Chandigarh airport, he made it clear to waiting mediapersons that while he was firm on his decision to leave the Congress—and that he would formally announce his exit at a later date—he would not be joining the BJP. There is widespread speculation that the Captain is planning to float a new political party, with many saying he will make an announcement in this regard within the next fortnight, probably around Dussehra.

The Captain's rebellion complicates Punjab's already turbulent politics. With the assembly election just months away, he will face many challenges in his bid to carve out an independent political space, from party financing to legacy issues—Amarinder is seen as a reclusive leader and while he no longer holds the chief ministership, he may still have to contend with anti-incumbency sentiment accrued over the four-and-a-half years he led the state. Those close to him believe his brand of nationalism will ensure he retains public support, as will his reputation as a moderate Sikh. "And his age is just a number. In 2012, Parkash Singh Badal was 84 when he was sworn in as chief minister," says a close associate.

Sources say the motivation to ready for yet another electoral battle also came from the "insult and humiliation" meted out to him in the past few weeks by the Congress. In this, there are again legacy issues to consider—while Amarinder has good relations with Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, the same cannot be said of his equation with Rahul. Between 2013 and 2017, Rahul made several failed attempts to reshape the party's Punjab unit, pushing for an alternative power centre with Pratap Singh Bajwa as the PCC (Pradesh Congress Committee) chief. In the run-up to the 2017 assembly election, Amarinder had put his foot down, threatening to quit if he was not given a free hand—and upon Sonia's intervention, Rahul stepped aside, addressing just two rallies in that campaign. Amarinder then built his campaign on the "Captain *di Sarkar* (the Captain's government)" narrative rather than on the strength of the Congress, and in the past four years, has fought to keep Rahul at a distance from both the Punjab government and the party's state unit. Despite pressure from the Gandhi family, he resisted the appointments of leaders like Navjot Singh Sidhu, Amrinder Singh Raja Warring and

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD
Former Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh

many other Gandhi family loyalists.

The acrimonious split between the Congress and Amarinder Singh has led to the BJP eyeing Punjab with renewed interest. The saffron party has been floundering in the state since last September, when its 25-year-old alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) ended following the controversial rollout of the three new farm laws. The meetings between Union home minister Amit Shah and Amarinder in end-September suggest the saffron party is eager to win him over as it needs a new partner to make up for the loss of old ally SAD.

In Punjab, the BJP's vote bank is primarily upper caste Hindus, though it has also gained support among urban Dalits. Its former alliance with the SAD gave it some support among upper caste Sikhs in pockets of the state, which it can no longer rely on. Hindus make up about 38.5 per cent of the electorate, and there are some 45 urban seats where Hindus are either in the majority or make up a substantial bloc. The BJP is looking for a partner with support in the state's rural areas, dominated by Jat Sikhs, who make up 18 per cent of the electorate and are a driving force of the protests over the Centre's new farm laws. Hindus tend to be swing voters in Punjab, and are, by that token, a decisive factor at the polls. In the past two decades, they have gone with the Congress in larger numbers than the SAD-BJP combine, with Amarinder Singh's reputation as a moderate playing a big role. However, he cannot take this support for granted—in 2007, the vote swung away from him, leading to the SAD-BJP alliance sweeping the urban centres and forming the government.

Since then, Amarinder Singh has gone out of his way to maintain nationalist optics—this includes his refusal to meet with Canadian defence minister Harjit Singh Sajjan in 2017 and his description of Sajjan as a "Khalistani sympathiser". In February 2018, it took a lot of pressure from the party high command to get Amarinder to meet with Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau on the latter's visit to Amritsar. Even then, Amarinder made it clear at the meeting that he was displeased by the prominence Sikh hardliners had in the Trudeau cabinet, even going so far as to hand over a list of nine pro-Khalistani militants active in Canada.

The Captain's nationalist posture also stands in contrast with Navjot Singh Sidhu's on-camera friendliness with the Pakistani high command, when he was photographed embracing Pakistan Army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa at Prime Minister Imran Khan's

swearing-in ceremony in 2018. Amarinder has often spoken of the threat Pakistan poses to India, especially in a border state like Punjab, through its efforts to instigate violence and the deliveries of arms, drugs and other contraband to nefarious actors. All these are calculated to garner support from Punjab's urban centres, where people still recall with dread the days of the Khalistan movement.

In that context, especially, Amarinder Singh's nationalist image remains his biggest asset. The former chief minister has also played up the drama surrounding his resignation—that he was forced out by the Congress party high command to appease Sidhu—in an attempt to strike a chord with Hindus and moderate Sikhs and coax goodwill to counter the anti-incumbency sentiment that might dog him even when he is out of power.

Political observers say if the former chief minister is looking to build bridges with the BJP, he will need to reconsider his position on the Centre's farm laws and do what he can to tone down the anger of the Jat Sikhs. People close to him say he is working with foe-turned-friend Pratap Singh Bajwa on this, meeting with farmers' unions in an attempt to find a solution. Sources say his meeting with home minister Shah on September 29 involved discussions on this point. Despite being ousted from the chief minister's office, Amarinder still holds considerable influence among non-Akali and non-communist backed farmers' unions—for one, he remains the head of the influential All India Jat Mahasabha, and is the titular Maharaja of the erstwhile Patiala fief. "More than a Congress leader, Amarinder's political stature in Punjab is as a Sikh leader, a regional satrap," says Jagtar Sandhu, an author and commentator on Punjab's politics and history.

Time will tell if the former chief minister is able to leverage his authority to end the farmers' agitation, which has been simmering for months with frequent flare-ups. The recent violence in Uttar Pradesh's Lakhimpur Kheri, in which the son of a BJP Union minister allegedly mowed down peaceful farmer protesters, has brought the issue back to the fore. The BJP's state and national leadership have again been put on the defensive. The local administration couldn't avoid filing an FIR against Ashish Mishra, the son of the Union minister of state for home affairs Ajay Mishra. While this might take the edge off the public anger, politicians and farmers' unions have been accusing the BJP of a cover-up. Following his resignation, Amarinder Singh has taken every opportunity to go after Sidhu, and appears determined to ensure that he is defeated in the assembly election. Sources say he is also bitterly disappointed with the Gandhi family.

NEW PARTNERS? Captain Amarinder Singh with Union home minister Amit Shah on September 29

ANI

Those close to Amarinder believe his brand of nationalism will ensure he retains public support, as will his reputation as a moderate Sikh

Amarinder's exit is bound to hurt the Congress in the upcoming elections in Punjab—one of only three states the party still controls. His stature in Punjab can also be gauged from the fact that he has delivered electoral victories in a Modi wave. In 2014, he defeated the BJP's key general, Arun Jaitley, at the polls in Amritsar; in the 2017 assembly election, his campaign brought 77 Congress members to the assembly (out of a total of 117), among its highest tallies in the state in the post-militancy era. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, Punjab was one of only two states (the other being Kerala) where the Congress did well. Ashutosh Kumar, professor of political science at Panjab University, says the damage to the Congress is a given; the only question, he says, is how extensive that damage might be.

Amarinder retains considerable goodwill and support in the Congress. Disenchanted senior leaders like Manish Tewari and Kapil Sibal have made noises about the turn of events. And chances are that more leaders will join the chorus in days to come. There have apparently been no attempts by the Congress high command to reach out to him since his exit, with only the G23 leaders (who wrote to Sonia Gandhi in August 2020 demanding party elections and an organisational makeover) remaining in touch with him.

Sources say Amarinder is almost certain to float a new party by Dussehra, and that backroom negotiations are underway to carve out a breakaway faction from the Congress. Some suggest he is looking to bring down the Charanjit Singh Channi government by convincing as many as 22 legislators to walk out, of whom 18 are apparently willing and ready to do his bidding. Parliamentarians, like his wife Preneet Kaur (representing Patiala), Mohammad Sadique (Faridkot), G.S. Aujla (Amritsar), Manish Tewari (Anandpur Sahib) and Santokh Singh Chaudhary (Jalandhar), are also believed to be firmly with him. While Channi has accommodated three Amarinder loyalists in his cabinet—Deputy Chief Minister Om Parkash Soni, Brahm Mohindra and Vijay Inder Singla—it is far from certain they will stay loyal to the new chief minister. ■

आज तक

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WELCOME MOVE
Rafale aircraft being given a water cannon salute to mark its induction in the air force

GUEST COLUMN: INDIAN AIR FORCE

The Need to Embrace New-Age Technologies

BY AIR VICE MARSHAL ARJUN SUBRAMANIAM (RETD)

With a new chief in the saddle, the Indian Air Force, which turned 89 on October 8, faces a plethora of challenges that demand great tact and strategic vision to surmount. Embracing the concept of parallel operations in its doctrine almost a decade ago to impact the tactical, operational and strategic domains simultaneously through the application of air power, this time around, the IAF confronts a situation wherein it must adapt to manoeuvring on parallel fronts during a period of transformational change. Of these fronts, five merit serious reflection by the IAF and the policy-makers within India's national security establishment.

First, the IAF must step up efforts to sensitise the political establishment and the joint war-fighting leadership of the value that air power, particularly offensive air power, offers as a first-mover in the business of inflicting combat attrition on adversaries. When this impact is felt across the spectrum of conflict before engaging in friction on the ground or on maritime spaces, there is a distinct possibility of causing temporal shock and psychological dislocation, all of which offer potential for speedy conflict termination and favourable political outcomes. The coercive impact of air power in the realm of no-war-no-peace situations was effectively validated by the IAF in the Balakot strike, albeit with some capability gaps to address. However, the broader lesson is that unless a rising power such as India is willing to take risks, adversaries will always have a first-mover advantage in this genre of conflict. Whether it is in a stand-alone offensive mode, or by enabling

instruments such as Special Forces to execute similar missions, or in maintaining the tempo of its robust non-kinetic capabilities as instruments of statecraft, the IAF offers tremendous value in less-than-war situations.

Second, the depleting strength of offensive combat assets in the form of 4th Gen and 4th Gen + multi-role combat aircraft is exerting enormous pressure on both the capacity and the capability of the IAF to train and prepare for combat against collusive adversaries across the spectrum of conflict. While the IAF enjoyed a competitive advantage over the PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force) in several realms, including air combat, air-to-ground weapon delivery and other enabling functions, this advantage is fast eroding. When this asymmetry is seen both qualitatively and quantitatively, there is cause for serious concern. While the emphasis on indigenisation and the boost given to the various variants of the LCA (Light Combat Aircraft) and AMCA (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft) programmes is laudable and must be fully supported by all stakeholders, the yawning gap in current capability must be speedily plugged. It is in this context that the pending acquisition of 114 MRFA (Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft) must be expedited along with the possibility of giving a meaningful mid-course correction through the various offset clauses of leapfrogging the Kaveri fighter engine quagmire that India finds itself in. Plugging both these gaps even as frontline combat aircraft such as the MiG-21 Bison are being phased out is essential for the IAF.

Whether in standalone offensive mode or by enabling instruments such as special forces, the IAF is crucial in less than war situations

Third, the stellar performance of the IAF in all its roles over Eastern Ladakh following the Galwan clashes indicates that if unshackled and allowed to operate with flexibility, the IAF has significant coercive potential. However, this capability will be severely stretched if the IAF is expected to impact several sectors over a prolonged period and across extended combat zones that could be separated by over a thousand kilometres. In such diffused scenarios, the IAF must plan to embrace a philosophy of centralised command and distributed control that empowers lower levels of IAF leadership with greater operational decision-making, particularly in sudden escalation during no-war-no-peace situations.

Fourth, there is little doubt that the IAF is the 'odd man' out in the bitter debate on jointmanship and integration. This was bound to happen as air power enabled by space straddles across all domains of war-fighting and is hence coveted by all without the necessary technologically enabled core competencies that are so essential for the optimum exploitation of platforms and weapons with a mind-boggling range of capabilities in the span of one mission. Amongst the several issues that merit resolution before parcelling out aerial assets across the proposed theatres, two stand out for their complexity. The first is the absence of a common communication and data transfer network to support seamless operations. The second is the operational orchestration of scarce resources, particularly when it comes to switching resources and the long decision chain that would involve competing theatre commanders and the current apex operational decision-making authority in Delhi comprising the three chiefs and the CDS as the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Instead of shrinking the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) loop, the time-sensitive and first-responder capabilities of air power will take a hit. On its part, the IAF must shed its 'siege mentality' that often forces it into rigid positions such as pitching for the 'primacy of air power' in an era where only a combined manoeuvre and firepower approach can offer a winning proposition. The need of the hour for the IAF is to create joint narratives that stress on the core competencies and 'decisive impact of air power' in multiple domains; and exploiting scarce resources under centralised command and distributed control for optimum effectiveness.

The last area of concern is in the realm of embracing new-age technologies such as AI, miniaturisation, hypersonic weapons, and drone swarms in a hotly contested aerial environment unlike the testing grounds of the West where all these have been developed in uncontested aerial spaces. Consequently, the IAF must not lose focus on traditional instruments such as better Beyond Visual Range (BVR) capability for its entire range of weapons; better capabilities to punch a hole in robust adversarial air defence networks, and increased focus on how to inflict serious combat attrition against adversaries who seek more to 'win without fighting'.

Tackling the present set of challenges requires more skillful manoeuvring by the IAF in the cognitive and intellectual domain. The power of persuasive but simple arguments regarding the current force levels, the coercive impact of air power and the debilitating impact of splitting scarce resources would serve the IAF well in these trying times. ■

Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam
is a retired fighter pilot from the IAF and is currently the President's Chair of Excellence at National Defence College, New Delhi

AGAINST THE GRAIN

A NEW BOOK ON VEER SAVARKAR REFLECTS ON THE REVOLUTIONARY'S IDEA OF A HINDU NATION AND HIS ATTEMPTS TO PREVENT PARTITION

VEER SAVARKAR
The Man Who Could Have Prevented Partition
By Uday Mahurkar & Chirayu Pandit
RUPA
₹595; 352 pages

Vinayak Damodar 'Veer' Savarkar (1883-1966) was a leading figure of the Hindu Mahasabha and is credited with developing the Hindu nationalist political ideology of Hindutva while imprisoned by the British in Ratnagiri in 1922. He invited much controversy with his views of a larger Hindu Rashtra and by opposing both the Quit India movement and Partition. Savarkar accused the Indian National Congress of following a weak-kneed and expedient appeasement policy towards Muslims that ultimately led to the partition of India. In 1948, Savarkar was charged as a co-conspirator in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi but was later acquitted by the court for lack of evidence. Excerpts from *Veer Savarkar: The Man Who Could Have Prevented Partition* by **Uday Mahurkar** and **Chirayu Pandit:**

THE MAKING OF AN IDEOLOGUE

When the dark clouds of pro-Muslim nationalism were hovering over the Indian horizon, Savarkar stepped on to the national political scene after his release from internment in Ratnagiri, which was preceded by 14 years of rigorous imprisonment. During this period, in addition to being a great revolutionary, he had also acquired the image of a great social reformer due to the movement against untouchability that he ran in Konkan from 1924 to 1937. In fact, his work on Dalit emancipation was pioneering. As a Brahmin, he himself performed the thread ceremony of Dalits to give them respectability and also organised massive anti-caste dinners. This put Savarkar on a collision course with orthodox Brahmins. But he remained undeterred as he was firmly wedded to Hindu unity and reform by rooting out social perversions from the Hindu society.

> **NATIONALISM WAS THE CORNERSTONE OF VEER SAVARKAR'S IDEOLOGY. EVERYTHING ELSE WAS SECONDARY**

Significantly, by the time he was released, Savarkar had also emerged as a great nationalist thinker because of his book *Hindutva*, which when seen along with Savarkar's Hindu Rashtra manifesto, gave the country a new definition of nationalism called 'unalloyed nationalism'. Following his release, when Savarkar decided to join politics, he had a choice. He could have joined the Congress because some of the leaders of the party, including Subhas Chandra Bose, invited him to join them. In fact, amongst those very keen on Savarkar joining the Congress Socialist Party were party leaders S.M. Joshi and Achyut Patwardhan, but Savarkar turned down the offer. A great nationalist

THE NATIONALIST
Vinayak Damodar 'Veer' Savarkar

and visionary, Savarkar knew that the Congress had gone so far ahead on the path of Muslim appeasement that it was impossible for it to retrace its steps. Above all, he well knew that the Congress's acceptance of Muslims' anti-national demands would tear Hindu-Muslim relations apart rather than bringing them together, thus eventually breaking the nation.

Savarkar considered it his national duty to free the nation from the web of the Congress's politics of giving special rights to Muslims at Hindu cost. He was firm in his conviction that his was a fight for equal treatment and not special treatment for Hindus, unlike (Mohammed Ali) Jinnah. So, when the Hindu Mahasabha leader and the great nationalist B.S. Munje decided to step down and offer the party's presidentship to Savarkar, the great revolutionary-cum-thinker proudly and graciously accepted it. Savarkar firmly believed that till the Muslims continued to demand special concessions at the cost of Hindu rights, Hindus needed a special party to protect their interests against Muslim aggression. That was in fact his justification for joining the Hindu Mahasabha.

UNDERSTANDING SAVARKAR'S HINDUTVA

Nationalism was the cornerstone of Savarkar's ideology and everything else—caste, regional and religious considerations—was secondary. He encouraged Hindus to be unapologetic, and believed that because Hindus were non-discriminating towards other religions, they should take measures to protect themselves when attacked. This, he believed, was necessary to create a level-playing field. Savarkar was all for 'one man, one vote'—a just, democratic principle that the Congress destroyed with its theory of placating pan-Islamist Muslims by giving them special concessions. Further, his theory of Hindu nationalism was a counter to the narrative created by supporters of the two-nation theory (that Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations, coined by Syed Ahmed Khan) that 'India is neither a nation nor a single geographical unit'.

Savarkar maintains that the words 'Hindu', 'Hindi', 'Hindustani' and 'Indian' have the same etymological origin in the river 'Indus', and refer to the human settlements in the Indian subcontinent on the banks of the Indus River since the ancient Indus valley civilisation. He said, "Ever since the Vedic ages in the past, our forefathers had been shaping the formation of our people into a religious, racial, cultural and political unit. As a consequence of it all growing organically, the Sindhus of the Vedic time have grown today into a Hindu Nation, extending over India and holding India in common as their Fatherland and their Holy Land. No other nation in the world, excepting perhaps the Chinese, can claim a continuity of life and growth so unbroken as our Hindu Nation does. The Hindu Nation is not a mushroom growth. It is not a treaty nation. It is not a paper made toy. It was not cut to order. It is not an outlandish makeshift. It has grown out of this soil and has its roots struck deep and wide in it. It is not a fiction invented to spite the Muslims or anybody in the world.""

By his definition of Hindu, Savarkar placed a greater emphasis on the Hindu civilisation as represented by a common history, common heroes, a common literature and art, a common law and jurisprudence and common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments rather than just a religion. Savarkar maintains that Hinduism in general is used to indicate Vedic faiths. However, non-Vedic faiths such as Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and even faiths such as animism have originated in the Hindu Holy Land. Therefore, 'Hinduism' means the 'ism' of the Hindu—like of Indic faiths or league of all 'isms' of Indian origin—meaning primarily all the people who reside in the land that extends Sindhu (Indus) to Sindhu (Ocean). Savarkar believed that Indian Muslims, even if they profess a different religion, can be considered Hindus, since they are

citizens of Hindustan and the words 'Hindu' and 'Indian' have the same origin. Savarkar was ready to call Muslims Hindu with some prerequisites, which he had evolved.

WHY HE OPPOSED PARTITION

When Lord Mountbatten arrived in India on 22 March 1947, he found the country on the brink of a civil war entirely fomented by the Muslim League. Savarkar wired to him appealing him to immediately consult the Hindu Mahasabha president and Master Tara Singh before making any fundamental changes affecting Hindus. Soon after this, he urged the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha and the Bengali Hindus to demand a separate Hindu province in West Bengal and expel the Muslim trespassers from Assam... He also called for joining the contiguous Hindu-majority districts of Sindh to the Bombay Presidency to prevent them from being swallowed by the Muslim League in case of Partition. At this time, he issued an unorthodox but practical threat that the Muslim minority would be given the same treatment as would be meted out to Hindus in the Muslim-majority areas.

Savarkar was deeply disturbed by the possibility of Assam being swallowed by the Muslim-majority Bengal as Assam was cunningly clubbed with Bengal by the British-Muslim League combine in the Grouping scheme. Assam, at the time, was facing the dual threat of Muslim influx from East Bengal and the Muslim League's Direct Action. So, in April 1947, Savarkar appealed to the Assam chief minister Gopinath Bordoloi and revenue minister Vishnu Das not to surrender an inch of land to the Muslims and eject every Muslim trespasser. The duo acknowledged his appeal.

Mountbatten offered Jinnah a choice between the Cabinet Mission Plan and a truncated but unsound Pakistan with its north-eastern regions in the form of East Bengal and neighbouring areas far away from the centre in the north-west, which constitutes today's Pakistan. The proposal, if accepted, meant the grim possibility for Pakistan of depending on India for defence and proving a drag on its financial resources in terms of its administration. Jinnah however remained firm that he wanted Pakistan, come what may.

Gandhi, on the other hand, told Mountbatten that to avoid Partition and ensure peace, Jinnah should be given the option of forming a full Muslim League Cabinet with complete powers to select ministers even if all of these were Muslims and that the Congress would sincerely cooperate with such a government till the measures it took were in the interest of the countrymen as a whole. Finding Gandhi's proposal too absurd, Nehru, Patel and the CWC put their foot down. Nehru said: "The Muslim League can have Pakistan if they wish to have it but on the condition that they do not take away other parts of India which do not wish to join Pakistan."

SEVERER HAD MADE A FERVENT PLEA TO THE CONGRESS TO NOT BETRAY THE ELECTORATE BY CONSENTING TO THE PARTITION SCHEME

Savarkar turned to the Congress itself in a desperate bid to make it see reason in what was a moral appeal. On 29 May, he made a fervent plea to the Congress not to betray the electorate by consenting to the Partition scheme. He said, after having won the last election on the promise of keeping India united, the Congress didn't have the right to even consider such a proposal. And if it still persisted then, he said, the elected Congress representatives should resign from their posts and seek re-election on the issue of a United India or Pakistan. He even suggested that the Congress should call for a countrywide plebiscite to decide the issue of Partition. However, Savarkar's appeal was a cry in the wilderness, particularly when the shadow of impending Partition was looming large.

The Partition plan was now in its final stages. Yet, Savarkar continued his efforts to prevent what he saw as political matricide. On the occasion of the Hindu Mahasabha working committee's meeting in Delhi on 7 June, Savarkar sent a message to L.B. Bhopatkar (the then president of the Hindu Mahasabha) urging him to continue the struggle. The crux of the message was that the Muslim provinces seceding from the nation should be treated as revolting provinces and the struggle to re-annexe them and to create Hindu-majority provinces in Bengal and Punjab should continue. He also urged for rejoining the Hindu-majority districts of Sindh with Bombay Presidency and made the same appeal to the Hindus of Sindh. His words echoed loud and clear: "They have vivisected our India. We will vivisect their Pakistan."

Under Savarkar's direction, the working committee of the Hindu Mahasabha passed a significant resolution that stated that the party was committed to the indivisibility of India and there will be no peace until the revolting Muslim areas were brought back into the Indian Union. In another significant move, the party's working committee demanded a referendum in the Hindu-majority areas of Sindh and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in East Bengal, as in Sylhet district of Assam, on whether they desired to join the Indian Union. Had the Congress followed Savarkar's strategy, India could have saved Hindu-majority areas in the east and the west, including parts of Sindh—an area, when put together, is almost the size of today's Bihar. ■

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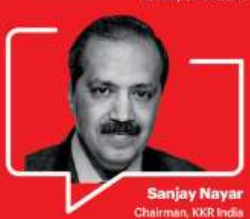

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PULLING TOGETHER The winners of the India Today Healthgiri Awards 2021 with Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya and India Today Group

PUTTING HEALTH FIRST

FELICITATING INDIA'S CORONA WARRIORS, DISCUSSIONS WITH HEALTH EXPERTS ON INDIA'S COVID SITUATION AND VIBRANT MUSICAL PERFORMANCES– THE INDIA TODAY HEALTHGIRI AWARDS 2021 HAD IT ALL

By *KIRAN D. TARE*

ON OCTOBER 2, AMID APPLAUSE from around 200 audience members at New Delhi's Hotel Le Meridien, 23 individuals and representatives of organisations posed for a photograph. These were the recipients of India Today's Healthgiri awards, 2021. The winners, which included doctors, administrators, social workers and corporate organisations, were chosen for their efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic to keep Indians safe and going above and beyond the call of duty to serve society.

The most touching moment of the ceremony was perhaps when the late Guruprasad

Chairman and Editor-in-Chief Aroon Purie

YASIR IQBAL

प्रधान मंत्री
Prime Minister

MESSAGE

From Safaigiri to Healthgiri, the commendable initiatives by India Today Group are rooted in the eternal values of selfless service and compassion that have been integral to our traditions and culture. The virtual presentation of India Today Healthgiri Awards on October 2, 2021 reflects the guiding principle recommended by our ancient scriptures – उप सर्प मातरं भूमिम् meaning 'Serve the Motherland'.

What better day to present the Awards than Gandhi Jayanti! October 2 is a day that symbolises the collective spirit of our nation and its people nurtured by the life and ideals of Pujya Bapu.

Healthcare has been in focus for nations and societies the world over during the times of Corona pandemic. The undying commitment, determination and putting service before self of our healthcare professionals including doctors, scientists and technicians in saving precious lives, not caring for their own, has been exemplary.

The health of a nation and its people are intimately connected. The collective resolve and efforts of 130 crore people have powered our fight against Corona.

The social responsibility of media institutions has helped spread positivity for the larger good. The seventh edition of India Today Healthgiri Awards celebrates the steely resolve and indefatigable efforts of our Corona warriors. I am sure that the Healthgiri Awards will inspire the people and media professionals alike to strive to do their best for the nation.

May the India Today Healthgiri Awards 2021 be a resounding success. Best wishes to India Today Group for its future endeavours.

(Narendra Modi)

New Delhi
आश्विन 09, शक संवत् 1943
01st October, 2021

PRIME APPROVAL A letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the India Today Group lauding the Healthgiri Awards initiative

Mohapatra, a 1986 batch IAS official from the Gujarat cadre, was posthumously awarded the "Unsung Hero" award for his exemplary service as the head of one of the Centre's empowered groups dealing with various aspects of the pandemic. Mohapatra succumbed to Covid-related complications in June. His wife and son received the award on his behalf to a standing ovation.

Apart from the award ceremony, the seventh edition of the Healthgiri awards—as the Safaigiri awards have come to be known in their sixth and seventh editions as the pandemic shifted our focus from cleanliness to healthcare—saw panel discussions about a timeline for a Covid vaccine for children, a possible third wave and performances by renowned singers like Udit Narayan, Rekha Bhardwaj and Amit Mishra.

In his welcome address, Aroon Purie, chairman and editor-in-chief of the India Today Group, spoke of the importance of cleanliness and pointed out that the spectre of Covid continues to stalk us. The pandemic, he added, has claimed millions of lives worldwide, disrupted lives and livelihoods and ravaged economies. "The living have had to cope with greater economic insecurity, anxiety and disruption in every aspect of their life. For many, challenges to mental and physical health remain," he said.

Purie also lauded the Covid warriors for their tireless efforts during this period. "It was a war. And it needed an exceptional group of warriors to fight it. Across the country, thousands of remarkable men and women and

THE JURY

Dr Naresh Trehan
Chairman and Managing Director, Medanta

Dr K. Srinath Reddy
President, Public Health Foundation of India

Dr Swati Piramal
Vice-chairperson, Piramal Group

Manish Sabharwal
Chairman, TeamLease Services Ltd

Aroon Purie
Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, India Today Group

RAJWANT RAWAT

"THE GOVERNMENT DID WHAT IT COULD, HEALTHCARE WORKERS DID WHAT THEY COULD AND WE ALL FOUGHT TOGETHER. THIS IS OUR GREATEST STRENGTH"

MANSUKH MANDAVIYA
Union Minister of Health & Family Welfare

organisations—both in the government and the public—were our Corona warriors who helped their fellow citizens. I believe that the winners today and those who participated in the Healthgiri Awards are the true heroes and the real champions of New India. It is our privilege to recognise their outstanding work," he said.

The Union minister for health, Mansukh Mandaviya, delivered the keynote address at the event. In his speech, he attributed the success of India's fight against Covid to the dedicated service of organisations and social workers. "The government did what it could, healthcare workers did what they could and we all fought together. This is our greatest strength. We witnessed a great commitment by these corona warriors—doctors, nurses and government employees—and it has been our tradition to felicitate such people," says Mandaviya. He cited the example of a nurse who left her three-month-old baby at home as she stayed and worked at the hospital for weeks, wary of carrying the virus home with her.

While speaking about the ministry's expenditure of Rs 900 crore towards the welfare of the underprivileged, the health minister also mentioned the food drives conducted by good samaritans during the lockdown. "Look at Hindustan's strength. We did not allow our neighbours to sleep on an empty stomach. *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* [the world is my family] is our culture," he said. India, he went on to add, was also there for the world in a time of crisis and supplied medicines to 123 countries during the first wave of the pandemic.

Mandaviya linked cleanliness and hygiene with Mahatma Gandhi's lessons, saying, "Gandhi*ji* used to say that the real wealth is health. We should follow his principles.... There needs to be a fine balance among the *panch mahabhuta* (earth, water, fire, air and space) to boost one's immunity. If this balance is not maintained, one's health won't be in good shape."

During a session discussing the third wave, health experts on the panel said that the possibility of one had not been ruled out. It depended on how long vaccines keep us protected and whether a new virus variant surfaces, they added. "We can only guess what will happen in the months ahead, but the main difference between earlier waves and now is that a significant proportion of the population is now vaccinated," Dr Naresh Trehan, chairman, Medanta Hospital, said. With close to 70 per cent of the country's adult population

WINNERS OF HEALTHGIRI AWARDS, 2021

CATEGORY
Winner

BEST GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL COMBATING COVID-19
Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Hospital, *Delhi*

BEST PRIVATE HOSPITAL COMBATING COVID-19
Kalinga Institute of Medical Sciences, *Bhubaneswar*

BEST CHARITY HOSPITAL COMBATING COVID-19
Topiwala National Medical College B.Y.L. Nair Charitable Hospital, *Mumbai*

BEST NGO OR OTHER ENTITY OFFERING HEALTHCARE SERVICES DURING COVID-19
Indo-Global Social Service Society, *New Delhi*

BEST INNOVATION FOR COVID-RELATED ACTIVITY
Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), *New Delhi*

BEST STATE IN COMBATING COVID-19
Karnataka

CELEBRITIES WHO DID EXEMPLARY WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC
Akshay Kumar and Twinkle Khanna

BEST FAR-REACHING CORPORATE CONTRIBUTION FOR A WIDER SOCIAL IMPACT
Wipro Ltd, *Bengaluru*

BEST AMBULANCE SERVICE
HelpNow, *Mumbai*

BEST OXYGEN DELIVERY INITIATIVE
- **SaveLIFE Foundation, *New Delhi;***
- **Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, *New Delhi***

BEST VACCINATION DRIVE BY A STATE
- ***Gujarat;***
- ***Kerala***

BEST COVID VACCINE DELIVERY PROGRAMME BY PRIVATE HOSPITAL
- **Narayana Health (Narayana Hrudayalaya Limited), *Bengaluru;***
- **Sir H.N. Reliance Hospital Trust, *Mumbai***

SPECIAL AWARD, ASSISTANCE IN LAST RITES
Shaheed Bhagat Singh Sewa Dal, *New Delhi*

BEST MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLING
- **The Cyrus & Priya Vandrevala Foundation, *Mumbai***

BEST CHILD CARE/ SUPPORT
World Vision India

BEST DISTRICT IN COMBATING COVID-19
- **Ghaziabad, *Uttar Pradesh;***
- **Faridabad, *Haryana***

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF COVID VACCINES
- **Bharat Biotech, *Hyderabad;***
- **Serum Institute of India, *Pune***

SPECIAL AWARD, UNSUNG HERO
Late Dr. Guruprasad Mohapatra, *New Delhi*

having received at least one dose of the Covid vaccine, many are now wondering whether a third booster shot is needed to increase the duration of protection from the virus. "If we are seeing signs of recurrence, then we can consider a third dose for them but not if we remain in the current state, where cases of re-infection are low. So, we should not jump the gun and give a third dose to healthcare workers, leaving the rest of the population unvaccinated," Dr Trehan said. Dr Navin Dang, director of Dr Dangs Lab in Delhi, agreed: "First vaccinate the entire population and then think of booster shots."

The Healthgiri awards event also put another topic up for discussion, one that is currently close to the hearts of many—child vaccination. By when will it be available and will it be safe? "I often get asked that if children are not harmed by the virus, why do they need a vaccine. But parents forget that in the post-recovery period, children are at risk of multi-organ inflammation. There are also many immunocompromised children at risk from Covid itself," Dr Anil Sachdeva, paediatrician, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, pointed out. Experts do predict some vaccine hesitancy in the initial days, but hope factual information and evidence of the vaccine's safety will convince parents to give their kids the protective jab. Dr Maninder Dhaliwal, associate director, Medanta's paediatric critical care unit, is all for it. "I would say get your child vaccinated," she said. "This vaccine is safe and will not only protect your child but also prevent him or her from spreading the virus." ■

RAJWANT RAWAT

INUNDATED An LNJP Covid care centre in May 2021

BEST GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL COMBATING COVID-19

WINNER: Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Hospital, Delhi

WHY IT WON: LNJP converted its entire premises into a large Covid hospital at the onset of the pandemic. During the second wave in May 2021, the hospital set up additional oxygen infrastructure. The ceaseless efforts took a toll; the hospital lost 13 doctors to the virus

NO TIME TO PAUSE

By SONALI ACHAJREE

ATTACHED TO THE renowned Maulana Azad Medical College (MAMC), the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan (LNJP) Hospital has been treating patients for over 44 years. The hospital grew out of a small health clinic that the British had established at the present site in 1932. Today, it is one of Delhi's largest public hospitals and, during the pandemic, has been the largest Covid-only facility in the national capital.

Recognising the need and urgency for Covid treatment facilities, LNJP converted its entire premises into a large Covid hospital at the onset of the pandemic. Aside from a special help desk to guide and monitor patients, it now also offers 2,500 isolation beds, 900 ICU beds and 500 ventilator-supported beds for Covid patients. During the second wave in May 2021, the hospital set up additional oxygen infrastructure—four plants are now installed on site, and work on a fifth is ongoing. LNJP now has a capacity for 56 MT oxygen every month. The hospital is also a part of the government vaccination programme, having given the first dose to over 40,000 people as of September 1, 2021.

During the pandemic, LNJP had its own private challenges; it lost 13 doctors to the virus and another 1,000 staff members were infected. However, this did not demoralise the team, and they continued their work without a break every day of the pandemic, with doctors and nurses working overtime, staying away for weeks from their families and, at times, even risking their own safety for the wellbeing of their patients. ■

STAYING ONE STEP AHEAD

BEST PRIVATE HOSPITAL COMBATING COVID-19

WINNER: Kalinga Institute of Medical Sciences, Bhubaneswar

WHY THEY WON: For setting up India's first dedicated Covid hospital at the very onset of the pandemic and extending Covid care to rural Odisha

By *ROMITA DATTA*

THE KALINGA INSTITUTE of Medical Sciences (KIMS) set up India's first dedicated Covid-19 hospital as early as on April 2, 2020, when the pandemic was just beginning to spread in the country. KIMS, in association with the Odisha government and Odisha Mining Corporation, set up the 500-bed hospital within the KIMS premises in Bhubaneswar, equipping it with critical care units, ventilators and an 8.6 MT capacity medical oxygen plant. Since a building was being built there, KIMS founder Prof. Achyuta Samanta turned it into a Covid facility.

KIMS also extended Covid care beyond the urban centres. It set up three 200-bed Covid hospitals in the backward districts of Kandhamal, Balangir and Mayurbhanj. With 200 beds added in Bhubaneswar, the total bed strength of the four hospitals has increased to 1,300.

"A serious global health crisis was always going to be the toughest humanitarian challenge," says Prof. Samanta, who started mobilising resources well in time to work with the state government in tackling the pandemic. As of August 2021, KIMS had conducted over 86,000 Covid tests and treated over 15,000 patients.

With quarantining and isolation taking a mental toll on many patients, the Covid hospital in Bhubaneswar kept all patients connected with their families and doctors round the clock through CCTV cameras and video conferencing. ■

FORWARD THINKING
The Covid hospital at KIMS, Bhubaneswar

A CENTURY OF TRUST Nair Hospital dean Dr Ramesh Bharmal (in light blue shirt) with staff members

MILIND SHELTE

THE TRENDSETTER

BEST CHARITY HOSPITAL COMBATING COVID-19

WINNER: Topiwala National Medical College and B.Y.L. Nair Charitable Hospital, Mumbai

WHY IT WON: Nair Hospital had the minimum death rate among hospitals in Mumbai. With three oxygen plants, it had enough supply for critical patients

By *KIRAN D. TARE*

THE B.Y.L. NAIR CHARITABLE HOSPITAL was the first in Maharashtra to dedicate 1,100 beds to Covid patients. It was also the first to have reserved beds for pregnant Covid-affected women and those who needed dialysis. In six months, the hospital staff conducted 1,100 deliveries and 5,000 dialysis treatments. "Most of the women came to us at the last moment when they were going into labour," says Dr Ramesh Bharmal, dean of Nair Hospital.

The treatment model developed by Nair Hospital was later adopted by several other hospitals in Mumbai. At present, the hospital has 150 dedicated beds for Covid patients. The hospital, which had its centenary celebrations in September 4, had the minimum death rate among all hospitals in Mumbai. It was a pioneer in making drugs like Remdesivir, Fabipiravir and Ivermectin available from the initial stages. The hospital had installed a genome sequencing machine to understand the genomic variants of the virus. Though classes at the medical college were affected, students were able to do practicals after following Covid norms. "It is a proud moment for us to become a trendsetter when it comes to Covid management," says Dr Sanjay Swami, who looks after the administration. ■

Lending a Tech Hand

BEST INNOVATION FOR COVID-RELATED ACTIVITY

WINNER: Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Delhi

WHY IT WON: The DRDO used its technical knowhow to design and manufacture Covid-specific kits and instruments

By SANDEEP UNNITHAN

ANI

BREATHE EASY The DRDO's high-capacity medical oxygen plant being installed at the Delhi AIIMS Trauma Centre in May

THE DRDO'S Covid task team, led by chairman G. Satheesh Reddy, undertook several crucial steps to combat the pandemic. From Sp02 (oxygen concentration)-based systems to ventilators, diagnostic kits and unique therapeutic drugs, to masks, PPE kits, oxygen plants and hand sanitisers, the DRDO was at the forefront of the war against Covid. Nearly 80,000 DRDO-designed PPE kits are being produced daily now. Over 3.5 million such PPE suits were made by HLL for industries last year.

The DRDO is also using medical technology designed for fighter aircraft to address the oxygen shortage across the country. Over 900 such plants have been installed across the country. The Onboard Oxygen Generation System (OBOGS) was designed to extract atmospheric air and convert it into oxygen for pilots flying the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas. Several private sector firms, including Trident Pneumatics and L&T, manufacture and instal these plants now. They come in various sizes and can supply 250, 500 and 1,000 litres of oxygen per minute to hospitals. ■

ANI

SWAB STORY Healthcare workers at the Bengaluru railway station

TIME, SPEED, SCALE

BEST STATE COMBATING COVID-19

WINNER: Karnataka

WHY IT WON: The state scored high in the recovery rate and vaccination campaign. Bengaluru also became the first fully vaccinated city in India

By ARAVIND GOWDA

KARNATAKA SCORED HIGH on several parameters such as testing, implementation of best practices, recovery rate and administration of vaccines. These were supported by a slew of initiatives, including the Lasika Utsav, to make Bengaluru the first fully vaccinated city in India and directing pharma companies to use their 2 per cent CSR budget for Covid-19 vaccination. By the first week of September, the vaccine had been administered to more than 46 million people in the state.

"Karnataka's success in the fight against Covid is the result of a three-tiered philosophy: act early, act quick and act big," says Dr Sudhakar K., the state minister for health and family welfare and medical education. "Time, speed and scale are critical in the fight against a pandemic and Karnataka managed that very effectively. We locked down early. We were the first state to announce a lockdown. We moved quickly to set up Covid infrastructure. Finally, we did everything at scale—be it testing, lockdown, infrastructure or vaccination," he says.

In the first phase, the first dose of vaccination was prioritised in the 23 districts where Covid cases were high. This was completed on priority in September. A majority of the IT firms have completed both doses of vaccination to employees with the support of the government. ■

Rebooting Lives

BEST FAR-REACHING CORPORATE CONTRIBUTION FOR A WIDER SOCIAL IMPACT

WINNER: Wipro Ltd, Bengaluru

WHY THEY WON: Wipro helped thousands with food, medicines, safety kits, oxygen and hospital beds during the pandemic

By M.G. ARUN

WITH THE PANDEMIC impacting both lives and livelihoods, IT giant Wipro, along with the Azim Premji Foundation (APF), committed an initial Rs 1,125 crore for Covid relief, increasing it to Rs 2,125 crore in May 2021 to expand its work on vaccination. A 1,600-strong APF team, over 55,000 members from nearly 500 civil society groups, local administrations in 27 states and three Union territories, public school teachers and Azim Premji University alumni focused their efforts on providing relief.

"There was an immediate humanitarian need and a longer term healthcare challenge," says Narayan P.S., global head-sustainability, Wipro. To address the former, Wipro fast-tracked approvals to provide food rations, cooked meals, sanitisers and so on. Its Pune campus was converted into a 450-bed Covid hospital. Doctors and trained personnel were recruited in under-served areas. Ambulances were provided in Jaipur, Bengaluru, Bhopal and Yadgir (Karnataka).

Wipro distributed 594 million food packets/ meals to the needy. Cooked meals were planned and supplied within 24 hours for migrants leaving Bengaluru by special trains. Around 13 million ration kits, over 500,000 PPE kits/ N95 masks, over 30,000 oximeters, 750 oxygen cylinders and 2,905 oxygen concentrators have been supplied. "We are working with partners to train thousands to go to the remotest villages to administer Covid vaccines," says Narayan. ■

WIDE NET
A Wipro Covid outreach team at work

ON THE GO
Shikhar Agrawal (left) & Aditya Makkar, co-founders, HelpNow

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

SPEEDY SIRENS

BEST AMBULANCE SERVICE

WINNER: HelpNow, Mumbai

WHY IT WON: For providing safe 24x7 logistic help to Covid patients through their dedicated ambulances and reducing the average arrival time of an ambulance from 50 to 20 minutes

By KIRAN D. TARE

IN 2016, ADITYA MAKKAR'S FATHER SUFFERED A cardiac arrest and had to be rushed to the hospital. Unable to get an ambulance on time, the distressed family drove him to the hospital in their personal car. In 2019, Makkar co-founded HelpNow, an ambulance aggregator, along with Shikhar Agrawal and Venkatesh Amrutwar, his friends and fellow students at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay, so that no one else would go through what he and his family did.

HelpNow tied up with several ambulance providers to set up an 'ambulance on call' facility. They also launched a central call centre, which now receives around 500 calls daily. In April, when India was in the midst of the second wave of Covid-19, the number went up to around 2,000. HelpNow has provided medical assistance to close to 40,000 people since its launch and had transported 12,100 Covid patients till August.

Moreover, they have mounted fund-raising campaigns, as well as sanitisation and food donation drives in Dharavi, Mumbai. HelpNow also collaborated with hospitals and corporate firms to serve patients better. They also provide ambulances to those who cannot afford one.

With 350 ambulances in its fleet in Mumbai, HelpNow is the largest private ambulance provider in the city and has also extended its services to Pune, Delhi and Bengaluru. With regular check-ups conducted and safety protocol followed diligently, none of the HelpNow drivers or volunteers have lost their lives to the virus. ■

A BREATH OF LIFE

BEST OXYGEN DELIVERY INITIATIVE

WINNER: Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, New Delhi

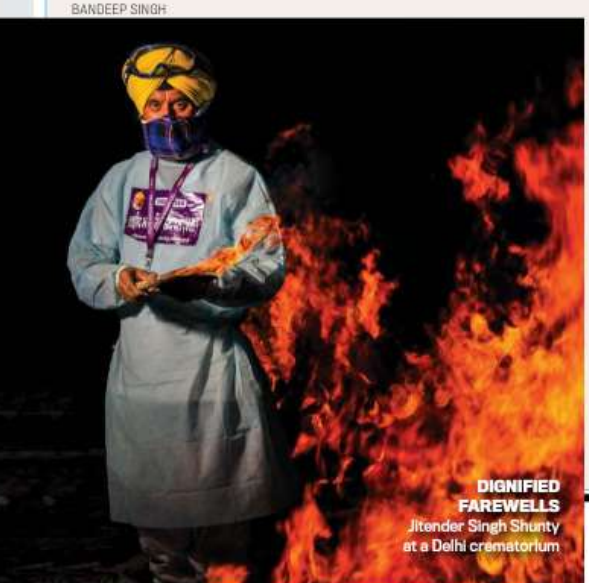
WHY IT WON: For setting up an 'Oxygen langar seva' and administering oxygen to hundreds of Covid-positive patients across Delhi NCR; for offering food, and free treatment to anyone in need during the pandemic

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

YASIR IQBAL

EFFICIENT SERVICE
Covid patients being tended to at the Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Covid Care and Treatment Centre set up in the Rakab Ganj gurudwara in Delhi by the DSGMC

BANDEEP SINGH



DIGNIFIED FAREWELLS
Jitender Singh Shunty at a Delhi crematorium

LAST MAN STANDING

SPECIAL AWARD, ASSISTANCE IN LAST RITES

WINNER: Shaheed Bhagat Singh Sewa Dal, New Delhi

WHY IT WON: For facilitating the cremation and last rites of over 4,000 Covid victims

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

For Jitender Singh Shunty, former BJP MLA and founder and president of the NGO Shaheed Bhagat Singh Sewa Dal, facilitating cremations of Covid victims has been some of his life's most painful experiences. In so many cases, family, friends and neighbours didn't come through for the deceased by

either choice or because of restrictions imposed by the nationwide lockdown. In such instances, Shunty and over 25 volunteers of the Shaheed Bhagat Singh Sewa Dal, an organisation he founded in 1995, came forward to help. From picking up bodies from hospitals or of those in home isolation, to sanitising and packing up the bodies and providing vans to transport them to the cremation ground, the volunteers worked day and night to help facilitate the last rites of over 4,000 Covid victims.

In his endeavour, Shunty's entire family contracted Covid twice and he even lost his driver to the virus. "My blood pressure level dipped to 35 at one point. My family believes that the good wishes of the people helped me survive," says Shunty.

During the pandemic, the NGO grew its fleet of ambulances/ vehicles to about 20. While the second wave was at its peak earlier this year, they were assisting 125 cremations in a day; with about 40 bodies picked up daily from homes. Those were difficult times, remembers Shunty. "It was a painful job, but someone had to do it," says the good samaritan. ■

THE DELHI SIKH GURUDWARA MANAGEMENT Committee (DSGMC), charged with the upkeep of gurudwaras in the capital, was active throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, serving those in need. They even took their langar seva to people's homes, providing meals to families that had tested positive and were unable to cook for themselves. During the second wave, when the country witnessed a huge spike in the number of cases and Delhi experienced a shortage of oxygen cylinders, the DSGMC stepped up its efforts and launched its 'Oxygen langar seva' at various locations. It procured oxygen cylinders, receiving some via donations from devotees, and administered oxygen to those turned away by overburdened hospitals.

The organisation also established a 400-bed facility in Bhai Lakhi Shah Vanjara Hall at Gurdwara Rakab Ganj, New Delhi. Called the Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Covid Care and Treatment Centre, the facility was set up with the medical support of the Delhi government and with the help of donations coming in from citizens. The Covid care centre was set up within 10 days and was assigned nurses and doctors by the state government to tend to the patients arriving from all over the National Capital Region. ■

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

SERVICE BEFORE SELF
Piyush Tewari of SaveLIFE Foundation

OXYGEN ANGELS

BEST OXYGEN DELIVERY INITIATIVE

WINNER: SaveLIFE Foundation, New Delhi

WHY THEY WON: Deployed 3,018 'Jumbo' D-type medical oxygen cylinders, totalling a capacity of 99 MT, across Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Meghalaya and Karnataka

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

WHEN THE PANDEMIC STRUCK, SaveLIFE Foundation responded on a war footing, putting together a team specialised in disaster relief, military supplies and emergency care and struck collaborations on a global scale to extend help. The first wave in Delhi exposed the city's inadequate ambulance network. "The ambulance response time lengthened; in some cases, it took 10 hours for an ambulance to arrive," recalls Piyush Tewari, founder-CEO, SaveLIFE Foundation.

The foundation arranged for 400 ambulances from the private sector to beef up the Delhi government's fleet of 200. Using data analytics, the average ambulance response time was brought down to 20 minutes.

The second wave brought another crisis: medical oxygen. On April 23, a Delhi hospital treating Covid patients issued an alarm that its oxygen supply was about to run out. SOS calls came from several other hospitals. "Between April 23 and May 3, there were over 500 SOS calls for medical oxygen from Delhi hospitals; in many cases, it led to preventable deaths," says Tewari.

The foundation again found a capability—rapid procurement—built over the years intersecting with the demands imposed by the oxygen crisis. The efforts that began in Delhi were expanded to 11 other states within days. Around 6,000 Type-D oxygen cylinders, with a combined capacity of 300 MT, were imported by the Delhi government with operational support from the foundation; 995 oxygen concentrators were procured by the foundation and distributed in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Goa. ■

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

BEST VACCINATION DRIVE BY A STATE

WINNER: Gujarat

WHY IT WON: For vaccinating (first dose) a majority of the adult population; running special vaccination drives for the elderly, differently-abled and in tribal districts

By KIRAN D. TARE

A SCENE AT AHMEDABAD railway station tells Gujarat's vaccination success story the best. The health workers seated at a couple of vaccination booths appeal to passengers to take the jab if they haven't yet. Vaccination is completed within a few minutes and passengers are on their way soon after. Easy availability of vaccine and an effective way to administer it has made a great impact on the state's vaccination rate.

Having administered the first dose of the vaccine to 84 per cent of the state's adult population and the second dose to 36 per cent (till September 26), Gujarat has topped the vaccination chart among all big states. The credit goes to the state health department's initiative to take vaccine to the people instead of waiting for them to come to vaccination centres. "We ensured that our health workers reached people and explained the importance of the vaccine to them," says Jaiprakash Shivhare, secretary and director of health.

Gujarat efficiently managed the vaccine supplied by the Centre and with a robust mechanism of cold storage and logistics, managed to cover every section of society. It created awareness about the vaccine through catchy slogans and widely circulating pictures of influential people taking jabs. ■

EFFECTIVE STRATEGY Union home minister Amit Shah at a vaccination centre in Gandhinagar

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Pushing Hard

BEST VACCINATION DRIVE BY A STATE

WINNER: Kerala

WHY IT WON: For its aggressive campaign to conduct vaccination drives, including the involvement of local bodies and the setting up of mobile vaccination units

By JEEMON JACOB

Kerala reported its first Covid-positive case on January 30, 2020, when a medical student returned home to Thrissur from China's Wuhan. Since then, the state has been on a mission to fight the pandemic, with determination and public support–these include a series of lockdowns ordered by the state government to control the spread of the virus. As on September 26, around 4.44 million people had recovered from the virus, with about 162,000 undergoing treatment. The state has seen 24,603 deaths due to Covid since March 28, 2020.

According to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, the state has achieved highest vaccination rate per million people in the country, with around 24.5 million people

A JAB IN TIME
Vaccinations being conducted in Kochi

having received at least one dose and about 11 million having received two doses. "The data reveals that among the casualties reported among those Covid infected, 57.6 per cent were not vaccinated and 26.3 per cent had received only one dose," he said at a media briefing on September 25. "Many of the vaccinated persons who died were either aged or had two or more critical illness. These statistics indicate that vaccination is the best remedy available to [protect people] from the deadly infection. Vaccination will reduce [the chances of] hospitalisation and induce early recovery. So I appeal to everyone to get vaccinated at the earliest. The health department and local bodies are making all efforts to achieve 100 per cent vaccination coverage with public support." He also cautioned the public to follow Covid-safety protocols (masking and physical distancing) even after being vaccinated to protect themselves from being infected.

Veena George, the state minister of health and family welfare, says, "We are preparing to vaccinate those under 18 as we are going to open up schools. We have deployed ASHA workers and appealed to local bodies to organise mass vaccination drives in their respective areas. We designed an aggressive campaign to vaccinate eligible persons who are bed-ridden, and have set up mobile units to vaccinate people." ■

PRESERVING OUR SANITY

BEST MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLING

WINNER: The Cyrus & Priya Vandrevala Foundation, Mumbai

WHY IT WON: For ramping up its free mental health support services tenfold during the pandemic

By *SUHANI SINGH*

ON CALL Employees at the foundation's office in Mumbai; Cyrus and Priya Vandrevala (inset)

BEFORE THE COVID pandemic struck, the Cyrus and Priya Vandrevala Foundation had 10 counsellors. Over the next 18 months, that number was increased tenfold to deal with the massive surge in calls to helplines. "There was a lot of anxiety about the disease, the lockdowns and the future," says Dr Arun John, CEO of the foundation. "Relationship and privacy issues also arose; people also called in because of financial difficulties and job losses."

The foundation introduced cloud telephony in August 2020 to ensure seamless connectivity and to ensure that no call goes unanswered. It also allows for calls to be scheduled keeping in mind the preferred language of the caller. Website chats and WhatsApp counselling were also introduced, which "opened a huge vista for the younger generation" to voice their concerns, especially those relating to exams and career prospects. Follow-up calls for those with suicidal thoughts were also arranged.

With nearly 25,000 communications a month, Dr John is aware that work isn't going to slow down anytime soon for his team of 123 counsellors and psychologists, some of whom are required to burn the midnight oil as calls come in as late as 2 am. In fact, he sees the foundation's workforce expanding to 300 by April 2022.

Priya Vandrevala, one of the founders, says, "To respond to the growing need, we increased our staff base exponentially, invested in technology and training and continued to grow our services. We have participated in almost 1 million conversations, giving free counselling and crisis support." ■

MANJU MANI

LEADING BY EXAMPLE
Dr Devi Shetty takes a Covid vaccine shot in Bengaluru

HEALTHCARE WITH A HEART

BEST VACCINE DELIVERY PROGRAMME BY PRIVATE HOSPITAL

WINNER: Narayana Health (Narayana Hrudayalaya Limited), Bengaluru

WHY THEY WON: Free vaccination in slums, construction sites and villages. Narayana Health also tied up with trusts and RWAs, and roped in gram panchayats and ASHA workers to take the drive far and wide

By AMARNATH K. MENON

Pledged to provide healthcare with a human touch, Narayana Health has been at the forefront in fighting the Covid pandemic, directing its core efforts towards vaccination and organising free inoculation camps in some of the most underserved communities.

Capitalising on the healthcare provider's IT-driven strengths, the vaccination programme has a four-pronged approach: vaccination at hospitals for a fee; vaccination at partner sites, with the cost borne jointly by the hospital and partner site; the 'Get One Give One' vaccination drive, wherein vaccine recipients at Narayana Health donate a vaccine dose for another person in need; and the 'Vaccine on Wheels' initiative with the Volvo group to reach out to communities in suburban and rural Karnataka.

"We are committed towards serving the needs of the underprivileged and bringing the highest standards of clinical quality to patients across the payer spectrum. At Naryana Health, the work responsibility is prioritised to–above allgive back to the community," says Dr Devi Shetty, founder-chairman.

In its endeavour to combat vaccine hesitancy, Narayana Health has offered vaccination to all its patients, whether coming for OPD services or getting admitted to its hospitals. It took special measures to ensure safe vaccination at all sites by enforcing social distancing norms.

The network has been innovating with new models of paying for healthcare. It initiated a 'micro health insurance scheme' in Karnataka that inspired the state government's Yeshasvini micro health insurance scheme for rural farmers. It is also building a next generation hospital operating system. ■

A MODEL OF EF

BEST VACCINE DELIVERY PROGRAMME BY PRIVATE HOSPITAL

WINNER: Sir H.N. Reliance Hospital Trust, Mumbai

WHY THEY WON: Running an efficient and public-friendly vaccination drive that has seen close to a million people being administered doses till September

By KIRAN D. TARE

A **TECHNOLOGY-BASED** system with electronic display to allot coupons and assign vaccination booths, friendly staff, monitoring of recipients' blood pressure and body temperature, and instantly providing them a printed copy of the vaccination certificate. These are some of the features that make the vaccination drive run by the Sir H.N. Reliance Foundation Hospital (RFH) in Mumbai stand apart. With a massive in-house and outreach

MILIND SHELTE

FICIENCY

programme, RFH had administered Covid vaccine doses to close to a million people till September.

Under the 'Mission Vaccine Suraksha' campaign by the Reliance Foundation, which runs the hospital, free vaccination has been rolled out for employees, partners, associates and their families. Vaccination drives are being run across the country in association with NGOs and government agencies, such as the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and the Kerala government.

Nita Ambani, chairperson of the Reliance Foundation, says they are committed to do everything they can to help Indians in these difficult times. "We continue to strengthen our nation's fight against the virus through large-scale vaccination drives across the country," she said.

Dr Tarang Gianchandani, CEO of RFH, explains the process. "We created an assembly line model—from registration of the recipient to post-vaccine observation—to ensure that vaccination is given in the fastest time so as to have high output from each vaccination booth," he says. ■

TRENDSETTER
The vaccination centre at the Sir H.N. Reliance Foundation Hospital

MANAGING CHILDREN Madhav Bellamkonda (in white and orange), CEO, World Vision India

Lending Children an Ear

BEST CHILD CARE/ SUPPORT

WINNER: World Vision India

WHY IT WON: For working towards the welfare of children and providing them support and care in the areas of health, nutrition and psychological wellbeing

By ROMITA DATTA

WITH A PRESENCE IN 25 states, World Vision India prioritised working for children during the pandemic. Among the most vulnerable, children have been impacted, psychologically and physically, in a big way by the virus, and the organisation recognised the need to reach out to them.

Since Covid's outbreak in March 2020, World Vision India, headquartered in Chennai, has reached out to 1.68 million children with services in the areas of healthcare, nutrition, education, water, sanitation and hygiene. Apart from these, they have also been giving children psycho-social support and working to protect them from child trafficking and sexual abuse, instances of which increased manifold during the pandemic. World Vision India also launched a tele-counselling line for pregnant women and mothers of infants with a special focus on nutrition, health and hygiene.

The organisation worked with ChildFund India, Save the Children India, Plan India and SOS Children's Villages of India to encourage the Centre to start a toll-free number (1098) that children can use to seek help in emergencies. World Vision India also played a big role in creating vaccination awareness by engaging communities, young people, religious leaders, social activists and prominent persons of society. About 30 million people were covered and mentally prepared for inoculation. ■

Power Couple

CELEBRITIES WHO DID EXEMPLARY WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC

WINNER: Akshay Kumar and Twinkle Khanna

WHY THEY WON: For their financial contributions and for using their social media platforms to gather resources

By *SUHANI SINGH*

AKSHAY KUMAR BECAME a real-life hero for many during the pandemic. Apart from donating Rs 25 crore to the PM Cares fund, he also contributed Rs 45 lakh to help 1,500 daily workers of the Cine & TV Artistes Association who had lost their livelihoods to the national lockdown. In 2020, he donated Rs 2 crore to the Mumbai Police and another Rs 3 crore to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to help it procure PPE kits, masks and rapid testing kits. Kumar and his wife, actress-turned-author Twinkle Khanna, amplified their efforts during the second wave, donating 100 oxygen concentrators to the Uday and Hemkunt Foundations in Delhi and Khalsa Aid India in Punjab. Khanna also made good use of social media, encouraging people to donate to the Help India Breathe campaign, and helping to raise Rs 1 crore for oxygen concentrators. ■

JODI #1
Akshay Kumar and Twinkle Khanna

MILIND SHELTE

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

GREAT STRIDES Rakesh Kumar Singh, DM Ghaziabad, at a district hospital

ON A WAR FOOTING

BEST DISTRICT IN COMBATING COVID-19

WINNER: Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh

WHY IT WON: For adopting the mantra of 'test, trace and treat' to tackle the virus; providing Covid-positive households with basic medicine kits to prevent cases becoming critical; and taking up vaccination on a war footing

By *MANISH DIXIT*

THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID in Ghaziabad, with its population of 4 million, was proving to be difficult initially because of patients pouring in from other districts of western Uttar Pradesh for treatment in Ghaziabad hospitals. However, adopting the basic principle of 'test, trace and treat' helped the district achieve great success.

From zero testing capacity till a year and a half ago, the district is now equipped to conduct 1,500 Covid tests daily. Ghaziabad was among the few districts in Uttar Pradesh that was able to eliminate its problem of oxygen shortage early on in the second wave. As per Ghaziabad district magistrate Rakesh Kumar Singh, oxygen plants have been installed at 11 locations which has now made available 4,000 LPM (liters per minute) oxygen in the district. Apart from that, about 366 oxygen beds, including ICU beds, are available in the Ghaziabad municipal area and 150 beds in the rural areas of the district.

The district's vaccination success, too, has helped it combat Covid. As per records, Ghaziabad's adult population stands at 2.7 million, of which over 2 million have received at least one dose of the vaccine and 750,000 both doses. With 110 vaccination centers, employing 550 staff members, established, Ghaziabad has achieved the target of administering 109,000 vaccines in a day.

For the third wave, the administration is entirely focused on its population of below 18-year-olds. Arrangements have been made for children's ICUs (PICUs and NICUs). Even Anganwadi workers have been equipped with tablets so that they can convey information online about health conditions in rural areas. ■

Helping Neighbours

BEST DISTRICT IN COMBATING COVID-19

WINNER: Faridabad, Haryana

WHY IT WON: Faridabad has among the highest recovery rates in India, and during the second wave of the pandemic, was able to support other areas in the NCR—Delhi, Noida and Gurugram—when hospitals found themselves stretched to breaking point

By *ANILESH S. MAHAJAN*

AS CASES SURGED during the second wave of Covid-19, hospitals in Haryana's Faridabad district were called upon to take up some of the cases spilling over from overloaded hospitals in other areas in the NCR (National Capital Region), including Delhi, Gurugram and Noida. This was in addition to the surge in cases from within Faridabad itself.

The industrial city used technology not only to assist patients and improve the management of oxygen supplies in hospitals, but also to draw up and implement schemes like a food distribution action plan and a door-to-door oxygen refilling system. It also conducted a special survey of 2 million people for early tracing of Covid-19 cases. Faridabad has 99,105 recovered cases out of total 99,827 cases as of September 1, 2021—with a 99.28 per cent recovery rate and a 0.72 per cent mortality rate, it has among the best records in the country. As of September 6 this year, 1.6 million doses of vaccines have been administered. It is expected that the entire district will be fully vaccinated by November. ■

QUICK OFF THE MARK
Covid-19 testing at a centre in Faridabad

RAJWANT RAWAT

AIMING HIGH
John Peter Nelson at the IGSSS office in Delhi

BEST NGO OR OTHER ENTITY OFFERING HEALTHCARE SERVICES DURING COVID-19

WINNER: Indo-Global Social Service Society, New Delhi

WHY THEY WON: Provided Covid relief and recovery support to an estimated 1.6 million people, particularly the rural poor, in 98 districts across 21 states

IN MISSION MODE

By *SONALI ACHARJEE*

THE INDO-GLOBAL SOCIAL Service Society (IGSSS) is a non-profit that focuses on sustainable livelihoods, reducing urban poverty, empowering the youth as change-makers and gender equity. Established in 1960, IGSSS has a presence in 25 states and one Union territory.

Through the pandemic, IGSSS has not only helped distribute ration and essential equipment to the needy but also provided vital support in rural areas for strengthening infrastructure, livelihood recovery and spreading awareness on health, government support and Covid vaccination.

Overall, IGSSS reached out to over 1.6 million individuals with relief and recovery support across 98 districts in 21 states. The organisation has so far distributed about 1.8 million masks, 300,000 sanitisers, 60,000 safety kits, 100,000 ration kits and essential medicines worth Rs 66.5 lakh. They also supported the setting up of two Covid isolation centres and a vaccination centre, apart from providing assistance at 500 Covid vaccination camps across states. Medical equipment was dispatched to several primary health centres as per their need. This helped the rural poor access Covid healthcare closer to home.

IGSSS realised the critical need for the public to be made aware of Covid prevention protocols, symptoms and vaccines in order to contain the pandemic. The various public awareness camps held by the organisation have helped over 500,000 people in slums and villages stay safe. ■

VACCINE VANGUARD

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF COVID VACCINES

WINNER: Serum Institute of India, Pune

WHY IT WON: For delivering nearly half a billion doses of Covishield between mid-January and the beginning of August, making it a critical component of the Centre's effort to vaccinate India's adult population. SII has also delivered millions of doses for export, and is in partnership with other firms to develop new vaccines

By SONALI ACHARJEE

The Serum Institute of India (SII) completed 55 years on June 12 as one of the largest vaccine producers in the world. It can manufacture about 1.5 billion doses a year of almost any inoculation. It has machines that fill 500 glass vials every minute and steel bioreactors almost two storeys high that can make more than 10 million doses per month. The institute helps inoculate 65 per cent of the world's children, in more than 100 countries, against diseases such as measles and tuberculosis.

Vaccination against Covid is critical not only to significantly reduce the chances of severe illness but to also stop the viral chain of transmission. SII has been a leading player in the national vaccination programme from the outset. Between January 16 and August 5, it delivered 444 million doses of Covishield to India. As of August 2021, SII has been producing 110 million doses per month, and is planning to increase production to more than 120 million doses per month. It will deliver 500 million vaccine doses to India between August and December 2021 to meet the government's target of 1.3 billion vaccine doses by the end of the year.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has partnered with SII to accelerate vaccination in partnership with industry, including healthcare providers. The vaccine drive will target communities in India's small towns and rural areas to ensure wide coverage. Partnership with CII will be a good way to close the gaps and ensure equitable distribution of Covid vaccines. SII has also exported 60 million

Atmanirbhar Dose

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF A COVID VACCINE

WINNER: Bharat Biotech, Hyderabad

WHY THEY WON: Ramped up production capacity to 700 million Covaxin doses a year; aiming for a billion doses a year by end-2021

By AMARNATH K. MENON

Covaxin has proved to be a success story of public-private partnership between Bharat Biotech India Limited (BBIL) and the National Institute of Virology, Pune, of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). It is India's first indigenous vaccine against Covid-19. BBIL is currently also working on 'BBV154', a novel adenovirus vectored, intranasal vaccine for Covid-19, along with the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

BBIL was founded in 1996 by Dr Krishna M. Ella and his wife Suchitra Ella, who left their successful careers in the United States to establish the life sciences startup for innovative vaccines and biotherapeutics. Dr Krishna Ella is the catalyst behind establishing the largest life sciences cluster, Genome Valley, in Hyderabad.

Established with an investment of over $200 million (Rs 1,480 crore), BBIL has over the past two and a half decades established an impeccable track record of innovation, with more than 145 global patents, a wide product portfolio of over 16 vaccines, four biotherapeutics and registrations in more than 123 countries, besides WHO (World Health Organi-

MASS EFFECT
Vaccine production at an SII facility (above); SII CEO Adar Poonawalla (right)

doses to other countries between January and February through the COVAX facility, a worldwide initiative led by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and the WHO, which aims at equitable distribution of vaccines between countries. SII is also in partnership to manufacture other vaccines against Covid. In June 2021, it started production of the first batch of COVOVAX, a Covid-19 vaccine developed by the US-based Novovax, at its Pune facility. COVOVAX passed its Phase 3 trial in mid-June with 90 per cent efficacy. SII has also tied up with Austrian biotech company Themis Bioscience for another Covid-19 vaccine that is currently being developed. ■

NATION'S PRIDE
Dr Krishna Ella at a Bharat Biotech lab

zation) pre-qualifications. It has acquired world-class research and product development and Bio-Safety Level 3 manufacturing capabilities.

The company has developed vaccines for influenza H1N1, rotavirus, Japanese encephalitis, rabies, chikungunya, zika and the world's first tetanus-toxoid conjugated vaccine for typhoid. It has delivered more than six billion doses of vaccines worldwide.

The acquisition of the rabies vaccine facility, Chiron Behring, from GlaxoSmithKline in 2019 positioned BBIL as the world's largest rabies vaccine maker. "Our commitment to public health and developing new innovative molecules to combat preventable diseases is a consistent and continuous process. Even when we took the journey to develop Covaxin, our goal was to demonstrate [the capabilities of] Indian science and the knowledge to tackle the pandemic through a vaccine that is safe, world class and affordable," says Dr Krishna Ella, chairman & MD, BBIL. ■

TILL THE LAST

SPECIAL AWARD FOR AN UNSUNG HERO

WINNER: Guruprasad Mohapatra, Delhi

WHY HE WON: For his dedication to duty in clearing up the problems in the production and supply of medical oxygen to hospitals at the height of the second wave of the pandemic

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

ON THE JOB
DPIIT secretary Guruprasad Mohapatra

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SECOND WAVE, hospitals across the nation were struggling with inadequate oxygen supplies, leaving patients in dire straits. If India saw any success in boosting the production and streamlining the supply of oxygen to medical facilities, one man gets the lion's share of the credit—the late Guruprasad Mahapatra, who served as secretary of the Department of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT). He also served as the chairman of an empowered group mandated to streamline the delivery of oxygen supplies to hospitals.

Toward the end of his life, Mohapatra himself contracted Covid. In his last months, despite running a high fever, he continued to keep himself available 24x7, attending meetings virtually and working to ensure that the oxygen supply mess was cleared up. On April 19, he was hospitalised, and two months later, succumbed to complications resulting from Covid-19. Even after testing positive for the virus and being hospitalised, he had continued to attend to his official duties via videoconferencing. His dedication to duty proved to be a major factor in ensuring that the mess in the delivery of oxygen supplies to hospitals was resolved at the earliest possible. ■

LIGHTS, CAMERA, BACK IN ACTION!

AS CINEMAS ACROSS THE COUNTRY OPEN, BOLLYWOOD IS WORKING WITH A VENGEANCE SHOOTING BOTH FOR THEATRICAL AND STREAMING PLATFORMS

By Suhani Singh

Taapsee Pannu is accustomed to having producers jostle for shoot dates. But after becoming a producer herself, she discovered that it wasn't just hard to rope in desired actors for projects, even the technicians were occupied. "That's called the OTT boom," says Pannu. "It is giving opportunities to people who have waited for years and never got their due. It has opened a parallel industry." It's evident in the packed roster of Netflix (90 films and series in the pipeline) and Amazon Prime Video (41 in production and over 50 in development).

But it's not OTT alone that's contributing to what is one of the most prolific spells in the Hindi entertainment industry. After a year and a half of more lows than highs, Bollywood is back in action. T-Series and Reliance Entertainment recently announced they will invest Rs 1,000 crore to produce a slate of films. Production house RSVP has seven films on floor including two war-based dramas, *Tejas* and *Pippa*, for theatrical release. Actors are itching to work, shooting titles envisioned for the big screen with gusto. Salman Khan was in Austria for part three of the popular Tiger franchise; and Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone were headed to Spain for a song. That is until the Narcotics Control Bureau arrested Khan's son, Aryan, after a raid on a cruise ship off the Mumbai coast.

"It is the best, best phase for the Indian film fraternity and I feel that the best is yet to come," says *Bellbottom* producer Jackky Bhagnani of Pooja Entertainment, one of the first to shoot a film after the first lockdown. He isn't the only producer working from London. Sajid Nadiadwala flew down Tiger Shroff and Nawazuddin Siddiqui for

EXCITEMENT AHEAD
Akshay Kumar in *Sooryavanshi*; still from S.S. Rajamouli's upcoming film *RRR*

Heropanti 2. Mumbai, the epicentre of Bollywood, is also buzzing. Pankaj Tripathi and Pratik Gandhi are busy shooting their next here. So crammed is Tripathi's schedule that he couldn't attend the success party of his OTT show: Season two of Disney+ Hotstar series *Criminal Justice*. "Filmmakers are short of actors," says a creative director, requesting anonymity. "I struggle to cast. It is such a herculean task now."

Blame it on web series, which have become equally significant to actors like Tripathi, Gandhi, Shefali Shah and Jaideep Ahlawat. They, in fact, take more time to shoot. Sushant Sreeram, director, marketing at Amazon Prime Video, India, goes so far as to describe the current phase as one where the industry "is at the cusp of a creative renaissance". "The revolution sweeping through the industry has touched everyone who is a part of it, from acting talent to writers and technicians," he says. More than half of his projects boast fresh talent.

"Projects that had been in the pipeline for a long time and those that had stalled midway are finally being rolled"

ADITYA GUPTA
Founder, Life First

BACK IN BUSINESS

No one knows the volume of work Bollywood is doing better than Aditya Gupta, founder of Life First, a health and safety company that oversees Covid-19 protocols on shoots. Gupta's day begins as early as 5 am, answering calls and attending meetings, and visiting sets. He calls it a day only by midnight. His 200-strong staff is currently working on 30 projects—films and web series

included—across India. Gupta attributes the "urgency" to fears of a post-festive season surge in Covid and a subsequent third lockdown. "Projects that had been in the pipeline for a long time and those that had stalled midway are finally being rolled," says Gupta, whose clients include Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, Dharma and Excel. "The scare that you had earlier is fading away. Celebrities who were super-paranoid earlier are no longer so." Some like Amitabh Bachchan overcame Covid-19 and have been working round the clock, shooting for television (*Kaun Banega Crorepati*) as well as films (in Nepal with Anupam Kher, Boman Irani and Danny Denzongpa for Sooraj Barjatya's next *Oonchai*).

The industry by now has adapted to the new normal, one where wearing masks on set, weekly testing and quarantine rules in international locations is now standard practice. "A lot of learning has happened," says Gupta. "People have understood that the pandemic is our reality and we have to live and work in it." Life First works with crew sizes small and big. Regardless of the number, be it the Atlee-directed film with Shah Rukh, which has a crew strength of 200-plus daily or an average of 120-160 people on a regular production, Gupta is convinced that Covid-19 protocols are here to stay.

RENEWED CONFIDENCE

Even film exhibitors are gung-ho, ever since the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi government declared that cinemas will be allowed to operate in the state from October 22. No sooner than this green signal was given than Mumbai-based studios and producers raced to block release dates. So sizeable was the backlog of films that all sought-after dates in 2022 have been taken. Audiences now know what they can catch on Eid (*Heropanti 2*), Diwali (*Ram Setu*) and Christmas in 2022 (Tiger Shroff's *Ganpath, Part I*). Two years worth of releases are being crammed in 14 months.

"Honestly, overwhelmed by the excitement you all have shown for the release announcements today!" wrote single screen cinema owner Akshaye Rathi on Twitter on September 27. "Makes us exhibitors continue to believe in the theatrical medium! Don't remember even one example of such euphoria around an OTT release in India." Sharing his glee over the flurry of release announcements was Devang Sampat, CEO of multiplex Cinepolis, which has 424 screens across 64 cities. Sampat isn't surprised by the enthusiasm given that Maharashtra contributes almost 30 per cent to the national box office. With the pandemic battering single-screen cinemas and forcing their closure across the country, the stakes have further risen for multiplexes, which already contribute 60 per cent to the overall box office collections a film. The timing is perfect, feels Sampat, as rising vaccination numbers has armed people with the confidence to explore entertainment options outside their homes.

For big studios like Yash Raj Films and Reliance Entertainment, which held two of its "spectacle" films—*Sooryavanshi* and *'83*—for a year and a half, the reopening spells relief and enables them to go ahead with new films. "It's been a nightmare managing the cash flows and keeping the wheels running," says Shibasish Sarkar, Group CEO of Reliance Entertainment. "Any large production house is sitting with three

Coming Soon...

SHAMSHERA
Ranbir Kapoor's first release since Sanju sees him take on Sanjay Dutt in an action thriller. RELEASING: *March 18, 2022*

RRR
2022 begins with the return of box office king S.S. Rajamouli, the brains behind the biggest Indian film: Bahubali 1 & 2. RELEASING: *January 7, 2022*

SOORYAVANSHI
'AA RAHI HAI POLICE...' wrote filmmaker Rohit Shetty on Insta. His action drama finally arrives in theatres after an 18-month delay. RELEASING: *This Diwali*

JERSEY
Expectations are sky high from Shahid Kapur's first release after the blockbuster Kabir Singh. This one like the latter is also a remake of a popular Telugu film. *December 31, 2021*

GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI
Alia Bhatt and Sanjay Leela Bhansali team up for this drama on a Bombay mafia queen. RELEASING: *January 6, 2022*

PRITHVIRAJ
Kumar's first release of 2022 is a genre he's not dabbled in much—a period biopic on Prithviraj Chauhan. RELEASING: *January 21*

RAKSHA BANDHAN
Is it even Independence Day if there is no Akshay Kumar release? This time, you guessed it, he is the ideal brother
RELEASING: *Aug. 11, 2022*

KGF CHAPTER 2
Sequel to the biggest Kannada film finally arrives
RELEASING: *April 14, 2022*

'83
Kabir Khan recreates the heroic journey of Kapil's Devils in the 1983 World Cup in England
Releasing: *Christmas this year*

ADIPURUSH
Watch Ram (Prabhas) and Raavan (Saif Ali Khan) clash in this CGI-heavy spectacle
RELEASING: *August 11, 2022*

GANPATH – PART I
Tiger Shroff does what he does best: fight off baddies with sublime martial art skills
RELEASING: *Dec. 23, 2022*

HEROPANTI 2
Action hero Tiger Shroff enters Salman Khan's turf with this Eid release
RELEASING: *April 29, 2022*

MAIDAAN
A sports drama on India's football team of the '50s and '60s. Ajay Devgn plays coach Syed Abdul Rahim RELEASING: *June 3, 2022*

LAAL SINGH CHADDHA
Aamir Khan is desi Forrest Gump. Also featuring Kareena Kapoor Khan, Naga Chaitanya and Mona Singh.
RELEASING: *Valentine's Day, 2022*

years of films. We are praying for no disruption." After waiting for cinemas to reopen, Sarkar is now waiting for dates of cast and crew so that his stuck productions can resume. "You have to patiently wait in the queue and hope your spot isn't taken," he says.

REGIONAL BOOM

As producers and cinema owners await SOPs [standard operating protocols] from the Maharashtra government, four states have already allowed cinemas to operate at 100 per cent capacity—Telangana, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Odisha. Telugu film *Love Story*, starring Naga Chaitanya and Sai Pallavi, crossed the Rs 30 crore mark in just one week, matching the overall collections for the Akshay-led *Bellbottom* and becoming the highest grosser post the second lockdown. Punjabi films *Qismat 2* and *Chal Mera Putt* also fared well—crossing the Rs 10 crore mark—despite the 50 per cent occupancy cap in Punjab. Early this year, Vijay's *Master* left a big dent at the Tamil box office, collecting Rs 107 crore with an additional Rs 50 crore coming from other southern states. Second behind *Master* in collections was Telugu film *Vakeel Saab*, a remake of Hindi social drama *Pink*. Of the many releases announced in late September 2021, some are pan-India titles, including S.S. Rajamouli's multilingual period drama *RRR*, Prabhas's *Radhe Shyam* and a sequel to the hit Kannada film *KGF*.

Hindi films like *'83*, with its acting ensemble coming from across India, and *Adipurush*, with Prabhas in the titular role, are vying to join the pan-India club and expand their geographic footprint. Whether or not they replicate the success of the two Bahubali films, what most in the film industry want is bums on the seats in the big, dark auditoriums and not at homes as they have been through the pandemic. While Bhagnani thinks "it will take somewhere around 12-18 months for business to get back to pre-pandemic times", Sampat believes the days we see a film hitting the Rs 300 crore mark are not far away. He expects audiences to be back in cinemas as early as Diwali when the Akshay-Katrina Kaif-starrer *Sooryavanshi* releases. "There is a huge pent-up demand [for big screen entertainment]," he says. "We are quite confident and hopeful that one blockbuster film and the entire scenario will change." For most in show business, it is *apna time aa gaya*. ■

"Any large production house is sitting with three years of films. We are praying there is no disruption"

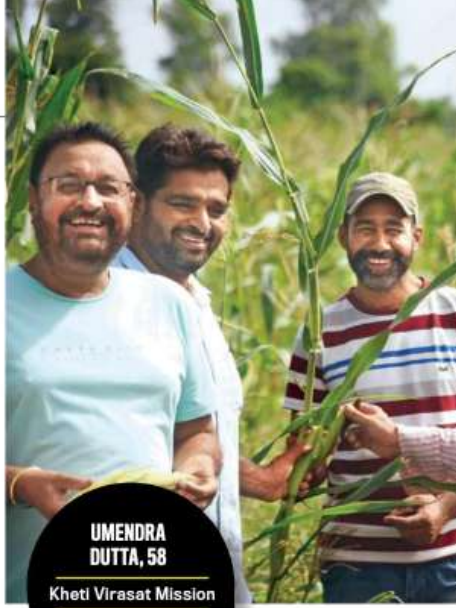
SHIBASISH SARKAR
Group CEO, Reliance Entertainment

INDIA TODAY RPG Happiness Quest

Bringing smiles *organically*

Happiness delivery: *Convincing farmers to adopt organic farming and seeing their incomes increase*

By **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**



UMENDRA DUTTA, 58

Kheti Virasat Mission

Jaitu, Faridkot district, Punjab

For the past 25 years, Umendra Dutt, 58, has made it a daily routine to get up early in the morning, flip through his diary to call up five new people with whom he can discuss organic, natural farming. They aren't just farmers but scientists, doctors, academics, economists, consumer and civil society groups, even politicians. The focus is on pushing zero chemical residue farming methods.

Based in Jaitu, a sleepy town in Faridkot district, Punjab, Dutt has devoted his entire life to introducing this method of farming to farmers of all kinds, especially small and marginal landholders, landless labourers and even the kitchen gardeners. What makes his work special is the effort is happening in Punjab where 85 per cent of the crops that come to the market are procured by central agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and Cotton Corporation of India (CCI) and hence there is extensive use of pesticides and fertilisers to boost production levels. This has not just impacted the quality of soil and groundwater but is also damaging people's health.

Dutt has trained over 20,000 farmers who now grow organic crops in about 15,000 acres. The number might be minuscule among the million-odd farmers of the state cultivating crops on 4.2 million ha. of land, "but the change is big," says Dutt, running his fingers through his flowing beard.

In 1996, Dutt was an editor at one of the publications brought out by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) when he began researching the impact of WTO agreements on agriculture. It changed his life forever. This was the time when most agriculture experts were heartily recommending that Punjab's farmers use chemical-based products to boost productivity. "I quit my job and decided to learn more. I returned to my hometown and decided to create awareness." At the time, he says, agri experts used to call him a "mad man, but today I am a progressive farmer". In 2005, Dutt floated an NGO, Kheti Virasat Manch (KVM), to not just create awareness but show by example how

HAPPINESS MANTRA

"We humans are a part of nature, so violence against nature is violence against god. I share with our farmers a compassionate and nurturing nature. There is no option but to live in harmony with nature for us. And, in return, nature always gives us a sense of fulfillment, joy, and a spiritual connect"

GOOD SEEDS Umendra Dutt with his organic farmer friends

organic farming can be successful and good for the Earth.

Dutt does workshops in 15-18 villages in a month. "I quickly realised that small farmers can come out of conventional farming easily and decided to focus and help them." Dutt added that the best response comes from women farmers. "The men do their calculation on the basis of output, whereas the women farmers look for *sukh* (well-being)," he says. "Even if she is a landless labourer, she understands this."

Dutt has been pushing the concept of organic kitchen gardens among the landless farmers in 60 villages of Barnala, Muktsar and Faridkot districts, so that they can feed themselves and sell the surplus in the market. KVM has already trained 6,900 such farmers, with the current target being 20,000 growers. The two waves of Covid, though, affected his plans. "March-April and September-October are seasons for sowing...we are now trying to catch up. Our campaign will take some time to regain momentum," he says.

But it's a win-win for those who opted for it. Jagmit Kaur, a landless farmer in Bhotna village in Barnala, says, "With *shuddh* (organic) vegetables, we not only get a better price but also assured consumers who don't want pesticides and hazardous chemicals in their food." Her husband Nirmal, who works as farm labour, now sells their produce at the markets. Punjab's big religious *deras* and social trusts are also opting for organic farming now and Dutt is their go-to man.

Pushing organic farming in Punjab is difficult "but doable", says Dutt. He says many farmers attend his talks and workshops, but only a few adopt the new methods. "They are looking for a market and marketing mechanism. As an NGO, we organise weekly *kisan haats* (farmers' markets) in 22 different towns. We have also trained some shopkeepers to set up exclusive stores where only organic farmers' produce is sold," says Dutt. Fifteen such stores are open now. ■

What makes me *happy*

SONALI KULKARNI
Actor

"Small things make me happy. It can be my first cup of chai in the morning or my flight being on time. If my daughter writes a letter for me or draws a picture or when I am cooking for my husband, I am happy. I like throwing surprise parties for my friends, which makes me happy. If I save water or electricity, or if I complete a nice workout, I feel happy. If my co-star gives a good shot, I feel fabulous. I do not have great expectations from every day, but I really like it when we have clean communication because many a times all our issues start from minor misunderstandings."

TIPS FOR HAPPINESS

Dr Vinod Kumar (Consultant psychiatrist and psychotherapist), Head, Mpower-The Centre, Bengaluru

"Happiness is an ethereal concept. Since time immemorial, attempts have been made to define happiness. But this depends on whether one is poetic, philosophical, sociological or psychological in one's perspective. Broadly speaking, happiness can be categorised into hedonic (pleasure-oriented) or eudaimonic (meaning- or purpose-oriented).

The positive psychology movement has been constantly trying to find what makes people happy—if there are any beliefs, personality traits or ways to create more positive experiences. Some recent studies found that happiness comes from simple small everyday rewards like receiving a compliment or an unexpected gift. Other studies show that more choices lead to more unpleasant experiences. However promising these findings are, positive psychology is still in its infancy."

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AWAKENING/ GETTY

VIKRAM SETH says that after finishing A Suitable Girl, he would like to spend his time writing only poetry

BOOKS

A Life in Verse

After the buzz around the BBC's adaptation of *A Suitable Boy*, a new collector's series of **Vikram Seth's** poetry puts the spotlight on the author's poetic accomplishments. Published by Speaking Tiger, the seven volumes showcase the breadth of Seth's genius and the recurrent patterns in his poems. In a rare exchange, Seth spoke with INDIA TODAY about his work.

Q. The story of your having picked up Charles Johnston's translation of *Eugene Onegin* is often cited as a seminal moment in your writing life. Have there been other such turning points?

A. There have been several such moments; I'll mention just one. In my second year at university, where I was supposed to be studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics, I went to the Oriental Institute, thinking I'd slip unnoticed into a Japanese class. I went to the wrong floor, and ended up in a Chinese class. I was thrown out as an interloper a week or two later, but it gave

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me a taste for the language. At about the same time, a friend happened to lend me the Penguin Classics translation of the poems of Wang Wei, an 8th century Chinese poet. He wrote of nature, friendship and solitude in a way I had never come across before. These poems moved me deeply and I decided then and there to learn enough classical Chinese to read them in the original. And in fact, many years later, in the year after the Tiananmen massacre, mulling over the troubled times of famine and civil war that Wang Wei himself had lived through, I translated his poems for myself.

Q. Have your experiments with poems written in monosyllabic words been informed by your translation of Chinese poetry?

A. Yes. Classical Chinese poetry, written as it is in stand-alone 'characters', which are monosyllabic, has a particular feel to the ear. It also uses tones, which cannot be replicated in translation, as well as rhyme and parallelism, which can. Certain poems of my own, like 'Soon' or 'Walk' or the poems of 'Shared Ground', as well as certain prose passages in *An Equal Music*, seemed to settle entirely into monosyllables, I'm not quite sure why. Maybe the need for simplicity; maybe an analogue to exhausted and broken breath.

Q. Beyond the *shayari* of *A Suitable Boy*, could you describe the influence of Hindi/ Hindustani poetry on your ear?

A. Well, in *A Suitable Boy*, there's lots of Hindi/ Hindustani/ Urdu poetry, depending on what's going on in the story or the minds of the characters: everything from nursery rhymes to folk songs to political jingles to *ghazals* to *nazms* to *marsiyas* to the Gita to *bandishes* from *shastriya sangeet* to *bhajans* from Gandhiji's Ashram Rachnaavali to the film songs of the period: being brought up in India, you're surrounded by all this! Of course, it has influenced me hugely; indeed, 'influenced' isn't the word—it has moulded me before I even knew I was being moulded. But perhaps for that very reason, I can't analyse its influence in the way I tried to with Chinese poetry, which I can trace to particular times and events.

Clearly, it has driven me, though; here's one example. A few years ago, I translated the *Hanuman Chalisa*—the *dohas* as well as the *chaupais*—into English, using a similar rhyme-scheme and quasi-trochaic rhythm. I've only read it aloud once—at the Patna Literary Festival in 2014, where I alternated between Tulsidas's original and my translation. I have no idea whether or when I'll publish it. Perhaps I should—I have myself, after all, been the beneficiary of translations. And even if it is a pale copy of a work I admire, it may give something to a reader who has no access to the original language.

Why did I do it? Partly because I love the poem. Partly because I was thinking of my character Bhaskar and his childhood part in the Vaanar Sena in the local Ramlila in Brahmpur. Partly because Hindu symbols, texts, rites and norms that had been part of my life were now being usurped by people who wanted to use these to bully or demean or crush other Indians—a profoundly unpatriotic, un-Indian, even un-Hindu thing to do.

Q. In *Three Chinese Poets*, you describe each poet's relationship with the State as an integral part of his identity, given the context of 8th century China. How would you describe this relationship in 21st century India?

A. I think that poets, as human beings and as citizens, are bound to reflect their views in their works. This is even more true of them than of novelists, because poets are inclined to show you their own state of mind, not that of their characters. But I would be loath to generalise about the relationship between the poet and the State. I don't think that poets are the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' any more than anyone else. Whether, when and how to speak out about the achievements and depredations of the State depends on many factors that are integral to each person, each poet.

This is true whether in 8th century China or 21st century India.

If, since you mention them, one looks at the three Chinese poets I have translated, each took a different course in this regard: Wang Wei was inward and quiet by nature, and retired from Imperial service and from the court itself when young—though his brother later became prime minister. The flam-

BOOKS

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Three Chinese Poets
Seth's translations of Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu's poetry

boyant Li Bai hardly cared about the State or what was going on in the world around him so long as he got lots of wine and ink and water—preferably with a tipsy full moon reflected in it. Du Fu cared deeply about service to the State, and tried unsuccessfully to pass the Imperial Civil Service exams several times. In much of his poetry, he is torn between the Imperial allegiances he grew up with and the terrible suffering of the people around him at a time of violence, forcible conscription, the separation of families and calamitous famine.

Q. When writing libretti, what kinds of things do you do differently?

A. I have, in practical terms, to be aware of two things that I can normally ignore—or at least not constantly be aware of—when writing poetry. First, the words can't twist the singer's tongue into knots. (Though the amazing composer of *Arion and the Dolphin*, Alec Roth, even set my phrase 'with green fronds curled' into singable music.) Secondly, one has to realise that a listener (unlike a reader) cannot look back over a text if they don't get the basic meaning the first time. So overly complex syntax or heavily referential language is out.

Q. So much of your poetry draws from a wellspring of natural imagery. Living in a city like Delhi (under the kind of looming climate catastrophe you have alluded to in your work), how do you replenish this source?

A. I walk in the parks when I can; this replenishes me. Or in our local bird sanctuary by the Yamuna. 'Sanctuary'—the very word implies how we human beings have put everything (including ourselves) under threat.

Above all, I love trees, so generous in their greenery. And birds, those descendants of dinosaurs.

Q. Have you considered writing another travelogue after *From Heaven Lake*?

Yes, but I won't. There's too little time left, and (after finishing *A Suitable Girl*), I'd like to spend the residue on poetry.

Q. You've spoken about having 'drifted' into unexpected projects, for example sculpting. When was the last time you found yourself engaged in something new and engrossing?

A. Actually, it was sculpture—additive, as with clay; subtractive, as with stone or wood; and both, as with plaster. And then, with glass or pewter or bronze, there's sculpture via a mould.

It is an endless world—of contemplation and of tactile creation. And one where, in contrast to the colour and two-dimensionality of painting, we are in a zone of chromatic spareness but three-dimensionality (with the implied ability to walk around it or even see it from below or above).

No change in perception so profound has happened to me in the last few years. But I hope, in my last decade or two, something does.

Q. From 'The sunflower of my youth is wilting' in *The Golden Gate*, to the recurring idea of detachment in the face of decay in *Summer Requiem*, do you feel poetry is uniquely suited to reflection on mortality?

A. Mortality has always been a bit of a preoccupation with me. After all, from the moment we are conceived, we are hurtling towards death.

Yes, I've usually expressed my thoughts on mortality through poetry; though the death of Mrs Mahesh Kapoor in *A Suitable Boy* could perhaps be the case of another genre.

Last month, my father died at the age of 97. Though he died at home, after a full life, with my sister Aradhana and myself there with him, it has left a strange hollow in my life. Every evening my thoughts turn to walking over for a drink and a chat with him. But the conversations are now (except in dreams) one-sided.

Now that I realise that only about a fifth of my own life (if I am lucky) remains, it will be interesting to see if I think less about death or more.

At any rate, I hope to be around for my *Sahasra-chandra-darshan*—to see my thousandth full moon. It will fall in 2033 upon Hanuman Jayanti, Good Friday and—fortuitously—my Buddhist brother Shantum's birthday. ■

(Read the complete interview on www.indiatoday.in)

–with Sonal Shah

AFP

ENTERTAINMENT

NFT: NEXT FUN THING?

NFTs HAVE OUR BOLLYWOOD STARS, MUSICIANS AND ARTISTS ENAMOURED, BUT WHAT ARE THEY?

What do Amitabh Bachchan and Sunny Leone have in common? Celebrity apart, they are both profiting off NFTs. While Big B is expected to launch his NFT collection in November, Sunny Leone has launched one already. The answer to the question you're asking—What's an NFT, anyway?—is simple and also complex.

An NFT (non-fungible token) is a digital asset. Examples include art, music, memes, video games, and so on. NFTs are bought and sold digitally through platforms like OpenSea, Foundation and WazirX, to name a few. You cannot buy an NFT in everyday currency like rupees or dollars. Every time an NFT is sold, its creator gets paid in cryptocurrency. But unlike cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin that have the same value overall, each NFT represents a unique value. Put simply, if you were to exchange bitcoin with someone else, you can do it easily as they are all replicas of each other, but the same, of course, can't apply to NFTs.

For the arts and entertainment industry, as also the fledgling creator economy, NFTs are being hailed as the "next big thing". Homegrown app WazirX, for instance, is a popular place for Indians looking to buy and mint NFTs. Recently, electronic musicians Ritviz and Nucleya announced that they would be selling 60 NFTs on the platform. While releasing their new collaborative album, they dropped NFT bundles on WazirX every Sunday from August 15 to October 3. Ritviz points out that NFTs can help creators connect with fans in a whole new way: "NFTs are not just an avenue for revenue generation but they are also a great tool for fan engagement. We hope this also inspires other musicians to explore the NFT ecosystem."

WITH LIVE MUSIC IN INDIA ON A STANDSTILL DUE TO CHANGING COVID RESTRICTIONS, NFTs (NON-FUNGIBLE TOKENS) CAN HELP SUPPORT ARTISTS

With live music in India at a standstill due to changing Covid restrictions, Nucleya believes NFTs can help support artists. "NFTs have been a helping hand to a lot of musicians and artists like us. With each drop, we wanted to create an experience, especially for our fans and introduce a new stream of creativity to the music industry." It isn't just big-ticket musicians, the sale of NFTs is helping independent production houses, too. Filmmaker Terence-Hari Fernandes, founder of Lekh-Haq, recently sold a short film, *For Those That Watch Me Dream*, as an NFT: "We wrapped work on our short right around when the NFT boom started. Many studios reached out to us with an interest in buying the NFT but it was sold by then."

Since nothing good ever comes for free, artists are required to pay platforms a 'gas fee' of anywhere between $150 and $400

A Revolution (from left) Amitabh Bachchan; music artists Ritviz (left) and Nucleya; art work titled 'Catching Ether' by Kashish Arora; a still from Terence-Hari Fernandes's short *For Those That Watch Me Dream*; and artist Santanu Hazarika and Ritviz's debut NFT artwork

(Rs 11,070 and Rs 29,525) to mint an NFT. WazirX, however, has brought down the amount to $1 by using the Binance smart chain. Delhi-based artist Kashish Arora minted his first NFT in March this year. Having especially created a new artwork, he saw it sold within a few days. "It's like having a digital art gallery to yourself, which is great. Earlier, a spot in a gallery was something reserved for traditional artists," he says.

Arora also used NFTs for Covid relief during the second wave. He partnered with multiple NFT-selling artists in order to raise funds. He is confident that the future is bright for NFTs. "There's loads of room here for artists to grow and find an audience. Now that the NFT hype is over, we have stopped seeing random sales and witnessed growth of artist-collector relationships. Art lovers are keen to support artists they like and whose work they consider good financial investment." Speaking about cryptocurrencies in an interview, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said "we have to be cautious and think it through", but for our artists, now is clearly the time to make hay while the NFT sun shines bright. ■

–Jaishree Kumar

INTERVIEW

"NFTs MAKE THE INTANGIBLE TANGIBLE"

NFTs seem to have taken the art world by storm but few know how they work. Are they mere hype or the future? As co-director of the Nature Morte gallery and founder of Terrain.art, ***Aparajita Jain*** *has emerged as one of the strongest proponents of this blockchain-powered technology*

Q. You just wrapped up an NFT group show at Terrain.art. How do you foresee this technology changing the art world?

Already, NFTs have become a standard for transactions. It empowers digital artists to make their works scarce, and automatically introduces trust into the ability to transact. It makes ownership clean and clear, and gives people the required proof of ownership in the future. To protect artists and creators from fakes, we need tech itself to find solutions, and to me, NFTs are the solution. It is the singular way in which ownership and provenance can be established for any kind of creative work—tweet, performance, video, GIF and game. Moreover, in their smart contracts, NFTs allow for royalties and encourage younger digital creators to actually sell their works. I think this will be the space where new kinds of creators come into the collected world of art.

"NFTs allow for royalties and encourage younger digital creators to actually sell their works"

Q. So, the safety of transactions, authenticity, trust, provenance—these make an NFT special?

Yes. NFT is a unique key for a creation. If there are additions to something, then multiple NFTs are minted for it. Blockchain allows all this information to be decentralised and democratic. Anyone can access the information and hence, it allows transparency into an otherwise opaque world. Also, for works that are eternally conceptual, they unleash the ability to purchase and buy the work and recreate it at a later time. It gives the intangible tangibility.

Q. Do you feel India is ready for NFT?

Was India ready for 3G or TikTok? We are always ready for what's new and ahead. It needs patience and some explanation, but I feel we are a very intelligent community and with trust, I'm hoping people will embrace newer technologies.

Q. What is your reaction to a persistent worry among sceptics that NFTs are a bubble waiting to burst?

What bursts in life is content or companies or initiatives that lack integrity. Currently, many things are selling on the basis of just being an NFT. Eventually that will wane. But content will always remain sacrosanct and will retain value. ■

–with Shaikh Ayaz

THIS IS (NOT) THE END

DANIEL CRAIG'S 007 SWAN SONG, *NO TIME TO DIE*, IS PROOF THAT THE JAMES BOND FRANCHISE HAS NOW BECOME OVERWHELMED BY ITS OWN POLITICS

The villain in *No Time to Die* (Rami Malek) is vaguely non-white, and his murdered father used to produce biological weapons for Bond's arch-nemesis Blofeld. His skin is disfigured, he is given to sitting cross-legged in bright shawls and enjoys theorising on the greater good. He employs thick-accented Russian scientists, has an island-lab that produces pandemic-ready smallpox to wipe out DNA-matched targets. If all this sounds like a throwback to a pre-Daniel Craig Bond, wait till you see Sean Connery's Aston Martin gunning down a whole posse, the return of Pierce Brosnan's flying cables, Roger Moore's missiles in the sky.

In conventional Marvel fashion, it's all kitschy self-referential, and should be taken lightly. At the same time, death and change are motifs for emotional heft. American interventionism, Cold War-era villains, sexism need to go. In their place is centrality of family values. While speculations are rife for what the next Bond would look like, it might be something like *Downton Abbey* or *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

In the film's only redeeming sequence, Bond pairs up with Ana de Armas (Craig's *Knives Out* co-star), a Cuban trainee-agent, for a mindless shootout. In a low-cut dress, she leads Bond down to a cellar and hands him a tuxedo. While Bond fumbles, wondering whether he should turn on the charm, she looks at him impatiently, but non-judgementally. There is no time for either harassment or sex. Between large vodkas, they light up Havana murals through gunfire. When it's time for de Armas to go, Bond tells her "You're excellent", and she returns with a "You too". For a few minutes, it feels like this is perhaps the way Bond evolves—he drinks and survives with an equal colleague. For once, the Bond girl is not caught in his narrative, but seems to have a story of her own.

The same cannot be said for either Bond's potential successor Nomi (Lashana Lynch) or love interest Madeline Swann (Lea Seydoux). The only purpose Nomi serves is to bring Bond out of retirement and compare herself to him. Swann is interested in bringing up her blue-eyed daughter.

The Empire is intact—all those who look and talk West-European are safe from the pandemic lab. The way in which the Empire persevered through Bond over the years is by making him prevail, no matter the politics. The side-effects of this strategy surfaced in *Casino Royale*, Craig's best outing as Bond, where love and ethics seemed to put both Bond and England in harm's way. This has been reversed in *No Time to Die*, where individuals are sacrificed at the altar of a convenient status quo.

As a kid, I would think of Bond before an exam or to get out of bed—a call to action. I don't doubt for a second that treating women as incidental, violence as a proportionate response, the inadequacy of orientals and communists, all reside in my psyche. But I wondered if a specific philandering, colonising, killing survivor was the lesser of two evils. Now Bond is pure ideology. ■

—Suryapratim Roy

Daniel Craig (left) and Ana De Armas in *No Time To Die*

IN CONVENTIONAL MARVEL FASHION, *NO TIME TO DIE* IS ALL KITSCHY AND SELF-REFERENTIAL, AND SHOULD BE TAKEN LIGHTLY

ALEX LIVESEY/ GETTY

Leander Paes (left) & Mahesh Bhupathi after winning the men's doubles title at the Wimbledon in 1999; and at a practice session (2008)

MANAN VATSYAYANA

DOCUMENTARY

THINGS FALL APART

A documentary about the Leander Paes-Mahesh Bhupathi partnership, *Break Point* also uses tropes you would remember from romantic melodramas

ON PAPER, *BREAK POINT*, a ZEE5 show on the highs and lows in the tennis partnership of Mahesh Bhupathi and Leander Paes, is a sports documentary, but it can also just as easily be viewed as a relationship horror story, one where the couple keeps patching up again and again, despite knowing they will get hurt.

Through the course of seven episodes, the married filmmaker duo, Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari (*Bareilly Ki Barfi*) and Nitesh Tiwari (*Dangal*, *Chhichhore*), rely on the talking heads format to show what made India's most successful tennis doubles pair tick and also what tore them apart. Parents, friends, coaches, manager, fellow tennis players including the Bryan brothers and Woodies–Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde–all chip in with their thoughts. Some, including Amitabh Bachchan, are unnecessarily interviewed. The best takes, though, come from the protagonists themselves.

Both Paes and Bhupathi are candid here, at times brutally so. "He hurt me. I will not forgive him," says a moist-eyed Paes after Bhupathi and he break up, one of the many times. "One of the dumbest moves I made in my career," says Bhupathi on giving up the opportunity to team up with Woodbridge after Paes sends him a one-line SMS to play again. Paes is expressive, even if one senses a deliberate rhythm to his delivery; Bhupathi is terse, more matter of fact. They admit that 1999, by far their best professional spell, was also one where they weren't communicating much. How is it then that the 'Indian Express', as they were known, managed to deliver results?

The answer lies in the biggest romantic trope of all–opposites attract. Lee is the alpha, more energetic; Hesh is the introvert, the one who delights in his wry sense of humour. (When it is revealed that the Paes family gifted him a specially-commissioned M.F. Husain painting, he says with a laugh, "At that point people were trying anything to keep us together.") Their contrasting playing styles complemented each other well on court, but with success, distance grew off court.

The Tiwaris tick off the key episodes in their sports journey–the 1999 Grand slam wins, Bhupathi's shoulder injury, Paes' neurocysticercosis diagnosis, the 2004 Olympic bronze loss, the drama before the 2006 Asian Games gold–but they don't tell us enough about how the two balanced their personal and professional lives.

The series concludes in a predictable, audience-pleasing fashion, but the imagery is in stark contrast to the reality of their relationship today. Paes reveals that despite living in the same neighbourhood, barely 30 seconds apart, they haven't visited each other's homes. *Break Point* shows that even while the best of relationships have fissures, some leave more permanent scars. ■

–Suhani Singh

MUSIC

WEATHER REPORT

Jazz musician ***Tarun Balani*** *is using his alter ego, Seasonal Affected Beats, to promote awareness about climate change*

READING AMITAV GHOSH'S *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* in 2016 was a turning point for Delhi-based musician Tarun Balani. And after suffering the Capital's Great Smog that same year, he found himself on the internet, poring over the details of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

"The more I engaged with it, the more climate change became a pressing matter to me," says Balani, an established jazz drummer who has worked with bands such as Advaita and Artistes Unlimited in the past. He is also part of the popular jazz act Dharma. He laughs and shares that since he couldn't all of a sudden join politics, he decided to use his art to raise awareness about climate change. Thus, Seasonal Affected Beats was born—an avatar that also allows him to experiment with electro and synth sounds. Balani came up with the moniker when he had to figure out a name for an arts project he was working on with Sangath, a mental health organisation. "It's a take on a real condition [Seasonal Affective Disorder], but 'seasons' is also a very common compositional theme—Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, for example—so it resonated with me".

"THE MORE I ENGAGED WITH IT, THE MORE CLIMATE CHANGE BECAME A PRESSING MATTER TO ME"

In 2020, Balani dropped the well-received EP 2° (2 degrees). The title refers to one of the Paris Agreement's long-term goals—to ensure the increase in average global temperature is well below two degrees. "There is a strong need in me to create something that people can engage with and learn from. I want people to read up and understand, for example, why my previous EP was called 2°," he says.

Balani's latest offering is *In Song*, a three-track EP releasing in November. He cites this EP as an important step in his evolution as a musician. "My previous EP had only one vocal track, and in general, I play a lot of improvised acoustic music, and it's all instrumental. I like to write lyrics, but typically I never used to spend time on it. However, last year, the pandemic got me thinking and songwriting and lyrics became an important driving force for me," he says.

Sonically speaking, Balani's music is replete with notes of urgency, reflection and hope. He says he doesn't like to put out conclusive statements. In that regard, an unlikely inspiration for him is M.C. Escher, the renowned Dutch graphic artist: "I'm paraphrasing here, but he once said that if you want to express something interesting or unique, present it in the simplest manner, then let the design reveal itself to people. That's inspiring." ■

–Vijayeta Basu

THE TOUGH GET GOING

MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST **SHREYAS IYENGAR** ON HOW HIS PANDEMIC-INSPIRED JAZZ ALBUM CAME ABOUT

The pandemic, a torn ligament and an ex-girlfriend's saxophone resulted in the creation of Pune-based Shreyas Iyengar's debut jazz album, *Tough Times*. The multi-instrumentalist, who has been playing music professionally for 17 years, says he had been wanting to write music for himself, but a bulk of his composing was done for ads, TV shows and background scores. He has also performed with several bands and done some Bollywood gigs, which he doesn't like to talk about. "You gotta do what you gotta do," he shrugs.

In SHREYAS IYENGAR'S latest album, Tough Times, the saxophone bears the melodic responsibility

The pandemic offered Iyengar some much-needed time to work on *Tough Times*. "During the lockdown, I started planning my day in such a way that I could dedicate time to different aspects of music," he says. Apart from time, the next hurdle that stood in his way was finding a lead instrument for the project.

As a child, Iyengar attended Carnatic vocal lessons but says that once puberty kicked in, that all stopped. Inspired by Led Zeppelin's John Bonham, he turned to drums after passing Class 10 and soon started playing professionally. "The good thing about being a drummer is that you mostly practise at home with other musicians coming over. They invariably end up leaving their instruments behind. So, I was like, 'Why not teach myself to play these instruments lying around?'," he says.

This served Iyengar well in the long run. Around three years ago, an ex-girlfriend had a saxophone which she wasn't interested in playing anymore. Iyengar picked it up around the time he was about to undergo knee surgery for an injury. "The funny thing is that the day before the surgery, we broke up. Usually, when I feel sorry for myself, my go-to would be drums, but since I couldn't bang on them, I started learning how to play the sax instead." It ended up bearing the melodic responsibility of *Tough Times*.

The pandemic also offered Iyengar inspiration. "The thing about being a middle-class Indian is that you don't have much to write about... there is a nice, comfortable safety net behind you. So, with the pandemic, there was finally something significant I could write about," he says. Iyengar approaches the album through the lens of empathy. "The plight of migrant labour, the problems domestic help went through, watching everyone around me going through a difficult time, that's what was going on in my head," he says.

Currently, Iyengar is working on a new EP, which he hopes to release in the next month or so. After a solo venture like *Tough Times*, Iyengar feels more confident collaborating. "The people I'm working with now all love to eat, so we just get together, eat well and make our music, which is quite nice." ■

–Vijayeta Basu

In Full Swing

Fresh indie jazz acts

THE REVISIT PROJECT

The New Delhi-based jazz/funk fusion outfit originally started as a tribute band in 2014, but made the switch to creating original music in 2017. This year, they released two singles, 'Miles to Coltrane' and 'Vibes for Tribes'.

HEAT SINK

Hailing from Ahmedabad, this act draws inspiration from genres ranging from jazz to prog rock. In 2019, they debuted their EP *Euphony*, which was mixed and mastered by Grammy Award-winning engineer Thomas Juth.

FAKEER & THE ARC

The experimental jazz-hop band from Bengaluru dropped their debut EP *Ikigai* last year, one they describe as a mix of psychedelic jazz and chill hop.

THE WORLD LAUGHS WITH HIM

Recently nominated for an International Emmy Award, **Vir Das** is now busy leaving his British and American audiences in stitches

Q. You won an International Emmy nomination just days before your US tour. Yours is the only stand-up special nominated in the comedy category. What does this recognition mean?
It means a lot, simply because it is not just a recognition of my stand-up but also of my culture. *Vir Das: For India* is a love letter to India and also a show about how funny Indian people are. You feel validated because instead of foreign versions of India, our own version is funny to the world.

Q. Your new show *Manic Man*, you write, has material that "probably shouldn't be caught on camera"...
It's about restarting life from scratch. We have all had our slate wiped clean and been given a chance to rediscover who we want to be. It's about my newfound minimalism, re-evaluating my relationship with my career, India, our government, with going out, with family. It is also about a man trying to outrun his mind because we have had a year and a half of sitting indoors and over-thinking.

Q. What was it like getting back on tour and doing sold-out shows?
I was definitely rusty initially. Stand-up is an art form you need to work at before it turns into something. Luckily, I began with a 14-show run at Soho Theatre in London, which is great to work out a show. By the end I felt the show had structure. It was slightly tricky performing for 250-300 people per show again. I had forgotten how quick comedy shows are and how a loud laugh comes at you. It's good to hear that again.

Q. Any plans to bring the show to India after the US tour or shoot it as a Netflix special?
I will definitely try and tour here but for that India has to open up first. I feel India is three-four months behind in terms of reopening since we have that many more people.

–with Suhani Singh

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